

Grass- fields Stories

from Cameroon

Peter
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Langa Research & Publishing CIG
Mankon, Bamenda

Publisher:

Langa Research and Publishing Common Initiative Group

P.O. Box 902 Mankon

Bamenda

North West Province

Cameroon

Langaagrp@gmail.com

www.langaapublisher.com

ISBN: 9956-558-11-7

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First Published 2008

Dedication

To Ma of blessed memory, for her gift of storytelling

Acknowledgement

I am intellectually indebted to the custodians of folklore and indigenous knowledge in the grassfields of the Republic of Cameroon. Special thanks go to my mother, Na Mbiayuh, who instilled the desire for learning in me from the cradle. I wish to express my sincere gratitude to all those who share my deep conviction that African oral literatures are on the brink of extinction and need to be preserved in print for posterity. As Malian writer *Amadou Hampâté Bâ*, points out, "*En Afrique, quand un vieillard meurt, c'est une bibliothèque qui brûle*" [In Africa, when an old man dies, it's a library burning.] (1960 at UNESCO)

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FOREWORD

G *rassfields Stories from Cameroon* is an anthology of short stories culled from the folklore of the grassfields in the Republic of Cameroon. It comprises animal trickster tales, bird survival tales, and human-interest stories. The compendium is a reflection of the mores, cultures, and value systems of the indigenous peoples of the Northwest province of Cameroon.

These stories deal with the day-to-day life of the sedentary and the globe-trotter. Each story is sufficient onto itself. The author has intentionally avoided chronology in the order of presentation of the stories. Many readers will want to turn first to one story, the title of which captures their fancy the most. Whether you read the stories in the order in which they are presented or dart about as your fancy dictates, you will feel the abundance of richness and entertainment the book contains. We hope that it will be placed where every member of the family can enjoy its contents, where guests can turn to it with pleasure.

The didactic value of this collection of short stories resides in its suitability to readers of all age groups. Pre-college pupils would find them fascinating. College and university students with an interest in African culture, history, anthropology, languages, and literatures would find this collection priceless. The uniqueness of the volume lies in its universal appeal.

The crafting of this book was motivated by the author's keen interest in the preservation of Cameroonian oral traditions in written form. It is hoped that the publication of the book would meet this end.

1 Marriage Of Convenience

When Mbionyi received his Baccalaureate degree from the hands of the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Penamboko, he said to himself that those years of hardship were over. Smiling from ear to ear he hugged and shook hands with his relatives who had come to see him graduate. Every member of his family was present at the commencement ceremony. Even his 89-year-old grandmother, enfeebled by Parkinson's disease, was in attendance. She had served as a surrogate mother for the young man when his mother died following a cesarean section.

"I thank you my child. Thank you very much for making me proud today. Who wouldn't be proud to have a son like you? You can call the white man's book and speak through your nostrils like the white man. I am a very proud old woman today. I only wish your mother were here to share this great joy with me," the haggard woman said, wiping abundant tears from her wrinkled face.

"It is all because of you, granny. You did your best to see me grow up," Mbionyi said, holding her emaciated arms.

"My creator may call me now. I will go with joy in my heart," the old woman said, holding her grandson in her bony hands.

When the ceremony was over, Mbionyi went home in the company of his jubilant relatives and friends. Dressed in a charcoal gray three-piece suit and a pair of black leather shoes, the 22-year-old man led the homebound procession, holding his Bachelor of Science

degree in his muscular hands. He gallivanted on stubby legs and winked at the young ladies in the crowd as if to seduce them. His friends kept badgering him with questions about his future career. When they reached home, his father asked him an unexpected question.

"This big certificate of yours will open all kinds of doors for you, isn't that right, my son?"

The sexagenarian hadn't said a word since they set out on the return journey from Penamboko. Sixty miles separated them from the village of Menka. If they had a car, it would have taken them less than an hour to get home. Hiring a taxi would have meant spending a whole year's income from their farm produce. They had to walk home.

"Papa, with a certificate like this I will be able to work in any office I want in this country," the young man said confidently. He was very proud of his achievement. He had worked very hard to earn an honors degree in plant science.

It was pitch dark when they got home. They were tired but happy. An illustrious son of the soil had just returned with a great booty. Mbionyi's father, who equated his son's achievement to killing a lion, had bought a five-year-old cow for his son's graduation party. The very day his son set foot in the white man's school, he knew that one day he would come back like a hero. Female members of the family had cooked basketsful of delicious food: *fufu* and *njama-njama* soup, *koki* and ripe plantains, *ero* and *water-fufu*, calabar yams, *kpa coco*, and *egusi* soup. There was alcohol galore: *manjunga*, *jobajo*, *odontol*, *matango*, *nkang*, *kwacha*, *mbu*, *fofo* and *palm-wine*. They ate and danced to favorite *makossa* and *mangangbeu* tunes till dawn.

Mbionyi woke up the following morning feeling ill at ease. In the midst of the excitement, he had not given thought to how he would get to Yaoundé in order to apply

for a job. To apply for a job he had to travel to the nation's capital. All applicants were required to personally submit their applications at the Ministry of the Public Service and be interviewed there. Yaoundé was some 2200 miles away from home. He couldn't cover that distance on foot. He needed the sum of 10.000 CFA francs to pay his fare. He didn't have the money. Worse still, he knew nobody in the capital city.

"Where will I live during my job search in Yaoundé?" the young man asked his father.

"When you get to Yaoundé, try your best to find Chui Bah's son. He lives in that city. He'll give you a place to sleep. A tribesman is a brother," his father said, giving him the sum of 11.000 CFA francs.

"Papa, I don't know Chui Bah's son." Mbionyi said, looking confused.

"Chui Bah's son is called Londu. His parents live in this village. Londu speaks the same language as you do. Go see him and ask for help," his father said, stroking his graying beard.

"Papa, Yaoundé is a big city. How am I going to find Londu in a huge city like that?"

"Oh, don't worry. He looks like his father. He is short and stout. When he comes to see his father and mother, he always wears a blue suit, a pair of brown leather shoes and a gold watch. You can't miss him," the old man said confidently.

"Papa, hundreds of men wear blue suits, brown leather shoes, and gold watches in Yaoundé. How am I going to pick out Londu from this crowd?"

"Well, you just have to try hard and you will find your tribesman. Remember that the woman that never tried hard enough to fall pregnant died childless."

"I will try my best, Papa."

"Go, my son. May the gods of our ancestors lead the way. May they open friendly doors for you," his father said, holding his son close to his hairy chest.

They were standing at the *Amour Mezam* taxi rank. Suddenly, he let go his son and walked briskly away without looking back. He did not want him to see his tears.

"Stay well, Papa," Mbionyi said, waving at his father.

"Go well, my son", he answered in a broken voice without looking at his son. Tears stood in his panther eyes.

The trip to Yaoundé lasted eight hours. Mbionyi was at his wits' end when the bus screeched to a halt at the Ndobolo bus station at *Carrefour Obili*ⁱ. The beehive activity in the city confused him. Yellow cabs sped past him at the speed of lightening. Infuriated taxi drivers hauled insults at one another. To Mbionyi's surprise, two taximen who been pointing their index fingers into the air as a response to provocation, suddenly stopped the engines of their cars, jumped out and got into a fist-fight.

"*Youa mami pima!*"ⁱⁱ one of the drivers said.

"*Die dog! Ne me touche pas!*"ⁱⁱⁱ the other responded, grabbing the offender by the collar.

Mbionyi heard passengers inside both taxis screaming in French. He could hardly understand what they were saying.

As he wondered how he was going to find Londu, he heard passersby speaking languages he had never heard before. He prayed that some one would speak *Meukoh*, his native tongue. People scurried in various directions as though their homes were on fire. How on earth was he going to find Londu in this maze? Placing his travelling bag between his legs, he stood at the bus station arms across his broad chest, feeling like a fish out of water.

Suddenly, an idea crossed his mind. He decided to look for his tribesman in bars and nightclubs in the vicinity. He looked at his watch. It was 8:00pm. He

grabbed his bag, slung it across his shoulders, and walked into the city centre. The first night-club he arrived at was called *Biabia Nite Club*. It was full of *wolowoss*^{iv} on the lookout for clients. He went in, bought a bottle of *jobajo*,^v and sat on a vacant table next to the DJ. Skinny girls wearing see-through outfits were gyrating on the dance floor. Men and women chattered in French, a language that sounded like Chinese to Mbionyi. He had dropped French in secondary school when his arrogant teacher called him a *mbut*^{vi} when he had a "C" grade in his finals because he could not conjugate the verb *être*^{vii} in French.

He was still wondering how to find Londu as he watched the merry-makers hover around him.

"You want maboya for the nite, cheri coco? I am clean, no HIV."^{viii}

Startled, Mbionyi got out of his daydream. A fair complexioned girl with abundant hair stood over him wriggling her semi-nude buttocks. She looked like a teenager.

"No, sista. I no di find woman. I di find my kontryman whe yi deh for dis town,"^{ix} Mbionyi responded looking straight into her blue eyes.

"Wheti be name for you kontryman"^x the young girl inquired.

"Londu. He comot for Meka village."^{xi}

"You comot for Meka you self-self?"^{xii}

"Yes, I be Meka pikin mese"^{xiii}

"I member say I sabi da Londu whe you de find'am."^{xiv}

"Na true talk you de talk? So you sabi ma kontryman!"^{xv}

"Yes, Londu na taximan, no?"^{xvi}

"I no sabi de kana wok whe yi de wok, sista"^{xvii}

"Ah yo mba, eh! See me some man. You de find person whe you no sabi'am?"^{xviii}

"Sista, I comot for Bamenda just now, just now. I come na for find wok for here. Ma repe say if I reach mek I find Londu."^{xix}

"Bo, give man one jobajo, no. I go find Londu gi you."^{xx}

"Wheti you de shak no, sista?"^{xxi}

"No be daso 33 Export?"^{xxii}

Mbionyi bought her a bottle of 33 *Export* beer. She used her teeth as a beer opener, drank half of the bottle at a go, and slammed the bottle on the table in front of him.

"I de come my broda"^{xxiii}, she said and walked out of the nightclub, swaying from one side to the other like a model competing in a beauty contest.

She didn't tell Mbionyi where she was going. He thought she had gone for good. After an hour she reappeared in the company of a short heavily built man in his mid-thirties. He was clean-shaven and dressed in black leather trousers and jacket. His polished brown leather shoes and gold watch glittered in the dim lights of the nightclub.

"Na ya kontryman dis,"^{xxiv} the girl said, pointing at the newcomer.

"I am Londu. I hear you're looking for me?"

"Yes, I am Mbionyi. Glad to meet you, brother Londu. I come from Menka. I'm son of Ntoh Dah."

"Oh, nice to meet you," Londu said, stretching his right hand to greet Mbionyi.

"My father asked me to look for you when I get here."

"Ah, is that right? I have been to the village a couple of times but haven't met you."

"Yes, that's because I was away in college."

"I see. So what brings you to the nation's capital?"

"Job search, my brother. I have just graduated from college and need a job."

"Congratulations!" What did you study at college?"

"Plant science, I have a degree in plant science."

"Great! Let's go home," Londu said, leading his tribesman out of the busy nightclub, after buying two beers for the young lady who had introduced him to Mbionyi.

The two young men were now sitting on a couch in Londu's two-bedroom flat in the Madagascar neighbourhood. Mbionyi took a quick look at a leather bag sitting on a mahogany table in the north end of the room. It was full of small plastic bags containing some white powdery stuff. Foreign currencies lay pell-mell on the table: euro, pound, dollar, yen, naira, cedi, and rand.

"Do you want something to eat?" Londu asked.

"Yes, thanks brother. I am starving," Mbionyi said, hardly believing the generosity of this man he was meeting for the first time.

Londu quickly prepared a bowl of *fufu*^{xxv} and fried *bunga*^{xxvi} while his visitor read a copy of the *Cameroon Post* weekly that lay on the centre table. When the meal was ready both men washed their hands and started attacking the lumps of food each with his five fingers.

"Massa, you cook like a woman! The food is so tasty!" Mbionyi said.

"Thank you," Londu said, without lifting his head from the bowl of *fufu*.

"You said you've come to look for a job?"

"Yes."

"Do you have money?"

"No, I don't. I am fresh out of college. My father gave me just enough to pay my fare to Yaoundé," Mbionyi said.

"You don't have money, and yet you want a job? That's impossible!" Londu said, laughing uproariously.

"What's impossible?" Mbionyi asked.

"Getting a job here without money," Londu said.

"I don't understand," Mbionyi said, shaking his clean-shaven head.

"Believe it or not, it takes money to get a job here," Londu said.

"Why?" Mbionyi asked.

"That's because you have to grease the palm of everyone that handles your job application file, including the *planton*. That's the way things are done here," Londu said.

"Who is *planton*?"

"The *planton* is the office messenger who transports files from office to office."

"Are you serious?"

"Oh yes!" Here in Yaoundé, the *planton* is the boss; he's even more important than the boss."

"*God forbid bad thing!*"^{xxvii} Mbionyi exclaimed.

"God is on vacation in Yaounde, my friend! It doesn't matter what kind of degree you have. You have to *tchoko*^{xxviii} if you want a job," Londu explained.

"I'm lost. I've spent four years working hard to earn a degree and you're telling me it doesn't matter? If a degree doesn't matter on the job market, what does?" Mbionyi asked, opening and closing his round mouth like a fish.

"Do you speak French?"

"No I don't."

"That makes things worse, my friend!" Londu added.

"Why?"

"Everyone here speaks French. This is the territory of francophones."

"So?"

"If you don't understand French, you're a *persona non grata* in this part of the country. They will call you *mon Bamenda*.^{xxix} Others will call you *Anglo*^{xxx} and poke fun at you," Londu said.

"Is that real?"

"Take it from me, my brother. The marriage between Francophones and Anglophones in Ngola^{xxxi} is one of convenience," Londu said, falling asleep.

Mbionyi woke up the following day feeling stressed out. The question of having to give bribes in order to get a job had kept him wide awake all night. The language question frightened him even more.

"Use this to pay your taxi fare to the Public Service Ministry. I'm leaving for work."

"Thank you very much, bro," Mbionyi said, taking the 500 CFA francs banknote from Londu.

"My girlfriend will show you where to catch a taxi to the Ministry. She will be here in a few minutes," Londu said leaving the house.

As soon as Londu was out of sight, Mbionyi jumped into his pair of khaki trousers, wore his marine blue long-sleeved shirt and black shoes, and accompanied the young woman that had come in and introduced herself as Clotide. He had been standing at the taxi rank for thirty minutes when a yellow taxi screeched to halt in front of him.

"Please, drop me at the Ministry of the Public Service", he said to the driver.

"*Fils de chien! T'es malade?*^{xxxii}" the driver yelled at him, taking off.

Five other taxis went past him without stopping. He felt too humiliated to flag down a cab. The sixth one stopped.

"I am going to the Public Service Ministry, please drop there," he said.

"*Anglo! Fiche-le camp, idiot! Va te faire porter par ta maman!*"^{xxxiii} the taxi driver hollered.

"What in the world is going on?" Mbionyi shouted to himself.

By reading the body language of the taxi drivers he concluded that they were hurling insults at him. He stared wide-eyed at taxis passing, wondering why they were not picking him up. Did they understand him? Were they

being spiteful? The word “Anglo” thrown at him by one of the taximen reminded of what Londu had told him. Crestfallen, he decided to walk five miles to the Ministry. The morning sun was getting hot and he was sweating profusely as he walked. If he had a job, he would forget this humiliation. As he wove his way through the rush-hour traffic, he dreamed of the day when he would own his own car. It would be an SUV, nothing more nothing less. He would show these bastards that he is a bachelors’ degree holder. He would buy himself a house too. Owning a house in the nation’s capital would be a dream come true. In his reverie, he covered the five miles without realizing it. The oval building of the Public Service Ministry stood in front of him. He walked straight into it.

“Good morning, Madam”, he said to a receptionist sitting at the information desk.

“Monsieur, je ne comprends pas votre patois-là, hein!”^{xxxiv} The coquettish young woman replied without looking at Mbionyi. She was busy applying lipstick on her bulbous lips.

“I beg your pardon?” Mbionyi said, looking straight into her green eyes.

“Ici c’est Yaoundé, you ya. Il faut parler français, monsieur. On ne parle que le français ici”,^{xxxv} the woman spoke at the top of her voice without taking her eyes off her mirror.

Mbionyi took a few steps backwards and walked quietly out of the office, feeling frustrated. Everyone around him spoke French. On his way out, he saw a door that was ajar. He walked through it and found himself in a large hall filled with people quarrelling over files. There were about fifty people in there, most of them men in their mid-twenties. He decided to approach one of the men.

“Good morning, sir.”

“Quoi?”^{xxxvi} the man responded looking at him as if he’d just landed from a strange planet.

"I said good morning, sir", Mbionyi repeated his greeting.

"*C'est un Biafraïse*,"^{xxxvii} the man said, spitting in his face.

The whole hall burst out into thundering laughter.

Mbionyi had had it. He walked up to his aggressor who was dressed in faded blue jeans and a black shirt, grabbed him by the collar, lifted him off the ground, and threw him on the bare cement floor, *pwam!*

"Gentleman, I am not a dog! I am a human being like you! You don't treat me like dirt!" He said, looking at the hostile faces in the hall like a wounded lion.

The man that he had thrown down got up quickly and gave Mbionyi a kick in his private parts. He lost consciousness and fell to the ground. When he regained consciousness he found himself in a hospital ward at the *Hôpital central de Yaoundé*.^{xxxviii} Londu was sitting beside him on the bed where he was lying.

"My girlfriend informed me of the problem you had at the Ministry this morning. She said you were brought here in an ambulance when she called the police. Are you feeling better?" Londu asked.

"Yes, I'm feeling better," Mbionyi answered, showing his friend the injuries he'd sustained on his testicles as a result of the scuffle.

"I advise you to return to the village as soon as you get well," Londu said.

"Why?"

"I believe that your degree will be put to better use over there in Abakwa."

"You think so?" Mbionyi asked, tears welling in his bloodshot eyes.

"Yes. Don't waste your time here. It is a dead end for people like you who can't speak the French language."

"I see. So it is French or nothing."

Two weeks later, Mbionyi left the *Hôpital central*.

"Take this my friend and pay your way back home," Londu said, giving him a 20,000 CFA francs banknote.

"Brother, I can't thank you enough. May God repay your kindness tenfold," Mbionyi said, taking the money.

"Good luck in your new job search! Remember that this city is a burial ground for educated people like you," Londu said, waving his tribesman goodbye at the Tchatchou Motor Park in Melen.

Mbionyi arrived home the same day in the evening. His father had left for his cassava farm situated one hundred miles away from the village. Mbionyi entered into his room, threw his bag on the bed, and looked for one of the ropes his father had used in the past for tethering his goats. He made a noose at one end of the rope and tied the loose end to the rafter. Placing a chair right under the rope, he mounted it and inserted his head into the noose up to his neck and let go his body. There was no one at home to stop the suicide mission. When his father returned from his farm three days later a stench from his son's room caught his attention. Opening the door, he found the inert body of the young man dangling from the roof. It was in a state of putrefaction. A note stuck out of the back pocket of his trousers. His father's eyes were filled with tears as he read its contents:

Beloved father, I know you will never forgive me for doing this. This is no way to die but I couldn't stand the humiliation any more. You sent me to school to earn a degree in order to fend for myself. You wanted me to look after you in your old age. Despite my hard work at school, I still cannot look after myself, let alone take care of you as you had hoped. I cannot speak French, therefore, I'm worthless. This country has disowned me. It has treated like an underclass

*human being. It has stolen my life. I am a victim
of circumstances. I love you Papa. Farewell.*

2 Libation

Dubeuh woke up feeling badly bruised. The teenager hadn't slept a wink the whole night. He had battled with her incessantly.

"I won't let you go! Come along now!" she said, baring her tobacco-stained teeth beneath her thick lips. Terrified, the boy stared into her hooded eyes. He feared he was going to die and decided to put up a fight. His thin lips quivered as he threw his puny hands around the elephantine body of the haggard-looking octogenarian.

"Leave me alone!" Who are you? What do you want from me? Go away!" Dubeuh shouted, struggling to escape from the phantom's strangulating grip. She burst into thunderous laughter, exposing her charcoal black gums.

"You don't know me, little one?"

"I don't know you! Get away from me!" the boy shouted again.

"I'll tell you who I am. I am your father's great grandmother, little one."

"You're my father's great grandmother?"

"Yes!"

"Go away, you old witch! My father's great grandmother died many years ago. I never met her. Go away! You're not my father's great grandmother!" Dubeuh screamed breathlessly.

"Today is your turn, little one. Don't try to fight back. I have come for you. Come follow me, now!"

Dubeuh gasped for breath when he woke up. Cold sweat ran all over his ebony body. He had been dreaming.

It was a nightmare. When he recounted his dream to his mother, she did not believe him.

"You're making this up," his mother said when he told her about the fight he had had with his great grandmother in a dream.

"The Bible warns us against superstition. Your great grandmother cannot appear to you in a dream. I believe the Prince of Darkness is trying to build his kingdom in you, my son," Na Nyanga said, looking at her sixteen-year old son in disbelief.

"Mama, what do you mean? I am telling you that I had a bad dream last night, and all you say is that the Prince of Darkness is building his kingdom in me? What is that supposed to mean?" Dubeuh asked angrily.

"My son, let's not fight. When your house is burning you don't wait for others to put out the fire. Let's go to Father McMahan," she said.

"What will Father McMahan do?"

"Let's go and tell your story to the white man of God. He may find a solution to this problem," she said, wiping a tear from her squinting eyes.

"Mama, I will not go to Father McMahan. What do I need from him? Does he interpret dreams?" the boy protested.

"No, he is not an interpreter of dreams but he may pray for a solution to your problem," the boy's mother insisted.

"What do prayers have to do with bad dreams?" Dubeuh asked raising his voice. He slammed the door of his mother's two bedroom mud hut in which they were sitting and went to see his father. Pa Ntoh invited his son into the living room of his three-bedroom house built out of sun dried bricks.

"Sit down here," he said, pointing to a vacant cane-chair beside his bamboo bed.

"Did you sleep well, Papa?" the boy greeted.

"Yes, my night was peaceful, and how was yours? You look worried. Is there a problem?" the man asked, scratching his balding head.

"Yes, I had a bad dream last night," Dubeuh said.

"A bad dream?"

"Yes, papa, I dreamed a terrible dream.

"What happened in your dream, my son?"

"I was attacked by a very old woman. She was dressed in a white gown and held a machete in her right hand."

"She was threatening to stab you?"

"Yes papa, from time to time, she would raise the weapon above my head, threatening to cut me into pieces if I did not follow her immediately."

"Follow her where?"

"She did not say where."

"Is that true, my son?"

"Yes Papa."

"Did you recognize the woman?"

"No, Papa. But I remember what she said."

"What did she say?"

"She said she was your great grandmother."

"Oh! My ancestors! Help! What offence have I committed?"

Pa Ntoh was shaking like a dry leaf in the harmattan wind when he led his son into his wife's hut. Have you heard this?" he asked, sitting down on a stool reserved for him in front of the hearthstones.

"Are you talking about our son's dream?"

"Yes, that's what I am talking about."

"Yes, he talked to me about it."

"What are we going to do?"

"We are going to appease our ancestors."

"How are going to do that?"

"There's only one way of appeasing our ancestors."

"And what is that?"

"We've got to pour libation. Our ancestors are unhappy. When the dead are angry, the right thing to do is to pour libation."

"What are you talking about? What has a fifteen-year-old child got to do with pagan practices?" Na Nyanga asked, biting her thin lips.

"Woman, shut up! What are you calling pagan practices?" her husband shouted.

"The thing you call libation! This child goes to a Catholic school, yet you want to drag him into superstition just because he has had a bad dream," the woman retorted.

"Woman, if I hear a single word from that big mouth of yours again, I will roast a stone and make you sit on it, do you hear me? You refer to the customs of my forefathers as superstition! *You head correct?*"^{xxxix}

"Yes, *ma head correct*.^{xl} That's why I don't worship idols!"

"Woman, I have heard enough of your nonsense," Pa Ntoh said, striking his wife in the face with his left hand.

Na Nyanga fell down from the bamboo chair on which she was sitting and cried like a baby. Her nostrils oozed blood. Unperturbed by the act of abuse he had just committed, Pa Ntoh fell on his wife, grabbed her head in both his hands, and kept hitting it against the hearthstones. Dubeuh was very angry. He got up and pulled his father off his mother and asked her to run for her life. She did not run away. She threw herself on her husband, got hold of his testicles, and kept pulling hard at them. The man roared like a wounded lion and kicked her in the groin. She dropped down and fainted.

The following morning Pa Ntoh summoned every member of his lineage to his compound. Every one came, the young and the old; men and women; cousins and second-cousins. Dubeuh's mother alone was absent. After learning that she had escaped to her parents' compound,

some relatives advised Pa Ntoh to go and fetch her. Others dissuaded him, pointing out that it was taboo for a woman to make derogatory remarks about ancestral worship.

"How could a mother of five abandon her marital home simply because her husband had given her a few beatings in order to correct her errors? Did our forebears not say that the basket of advice is never full?" Pa Ntoh's elder brother said.

When the audience was quiet, Pa Ntoh welcomed them.

"Brothers and sisters, I thank you all for being here today. I thank the gods of our ancestors for bringing you all from your various homes to this compound safely. We ask them to watch over us as we do the thing that they commanded us to do in times of trouble."

No one interrupted him. They all nodded in approbation.

"Our son Dubeuh has been having terrible dreams lately," he continued. "The dreadful thing is that in his dreams he puts up a fight with my own great grandmother!"

"Aago! Aago! Aago!"^{xli} The crowd exclaimed.

"You all know that when a child fights with an ancestor in a dream, that is a sign of worse things to come. We must stop the impending fire from consuming us all," Pa Ntoh said, facing his assembled relatives.

"Ngieekeuleh! Ngieekeuleh!"^{xlii}

From his living room, Pa Ntoh brought out a black cock, a jug of palm-wine, a bag of kola nuts, a basketful of smoked mudfish, and a calabash of palm-oil. Sixty-six pairs of eyes watched every gesture he made. They all wore sackcloth made out of raffia fibre and smeared their faces with white clay. Women wore red headscarfs; men were bare headed. They stood in a circle surrounding Pa Ntoh, the libation priest. He was stark naked except for a multicoloured loincloth worn around his broad waist. His

porch-marked body was spattered with ground camwood from head to toe. Slung over his muscular shoulders was a goat-skin bag containing the horn of a buffalo, several cowries, and seven feathers of a black owl.

"Brothers and sisters, the dead are not dead. We do not see them but they see us. They're in our midst. They talk to us in many ways."

Pa Ntoh fastened two porcupine quills into his *ndikong*^{xliii} hat as he spoke.

"Our ancestors knew better when they said that a single hand cannot tie a bundle. I'll add my voice to theirs by saying that one house cannot make a compound.

"*Wuulee, Wuulee, Wuulee!*"^{xliv} the crowd chorused.

"Brothers and sisters, dreams are like streams that reflect our shadows. When you see a giant rat running about in broad daylight, be sure that someone is after its life. When a child dreams a bad dream and fights with an ancestor, we must appease that ancestor."

"*Ngieekeuleh! Ngieekeuleh!*" the crowd roared again.

"How do we appease dead people?" Bunkwe asked.

"By feeding them," Pa Ntoh said.

"How do we feed dead people?" Bunkwe interrupted again.

"By pouring libation", Pa Ntoh answered without looking at him.

"*Wuulee, Wuulee, Wuulee!*" the people responded in unison.

Bunkwe was Pa Ntoh's younger brother who had spent twenty-seven years in the white man's land reading all kinds of books. He had just returned home and was having a hard time embracing some aspects of his people's culture. After a while, Bunkwe withdrew from the gathering and walked straight out of the compound without looking back. Nobody tried to stop him. They simply stared at him in dismay.

Pa Ntoh invited the audience to accompany him to his great grandmother's grave located in front of his house. Suddenly, he closed his eyes and went into a trance. Silence fell on the crowd. No one moved. They watched starry-eyed. After a long while, Pa Ntoh opened his eyes. Arms akimbo, he uttered inaudible incantations as if to himself. He shut his eyes again, spat on the dust surrounding the grave. He opened his eyes, did a few dance steps around it, grabbed the cock by its legs and swung it nine times in the air before wringing its neck with his bare hands. He then intoned the *Ndonyi*^{xlv}:

Beuh nyi meukoh

Ho ho! Ho ha!

Fon cheumbe! Ha ho ha!

Fon ngombi! Ha Ho!

Fon ngombu! Ho ho! ha ha!

Fon ngoketunjia! Ho ha! Ho ha!

Bah teu hah fia keughoh bi! Ho ho ho!

Beuh nyi meukoh! Hum hum hum!

Bi chi ba keuhoh bweubelo! Hum hum hum!

Bi soheu sheu yah! Ho ho hum hum!

Bi boh yobeu mbweu bah! Ho ha ho!

Ho ha! ho! Ndonyi!

When the singing was over, Pa Ntoh tore the cock into two equal halves and sprinkled some of its blood on his great grandmother's grave. He murmured some more incantations and started to run like an insane person to the four corners of the compound, pointing the dead cock to the west, east, south, and north. He danced, shaking his broad shoulders and wriggling his stiff buttocks.

Suddenly, he stopped, took hold of the jug of palm-wine, and poured its content into his *ndeuh mbeuh*^{xlvi}. After drinking the wine he spat it over the heads of everyone standing in the crowd. Then he intoned a propitiatory prayer addressed to the ancestors:

*Fathers of our fathers, fathers of our grandfathers,
Mothers of our mothers, mothers of our grandmothers,
Here we are today, children of your great grandchildren,
We are gathered here to salute you,
Here we are today gathered to pay our respects,
We are assembled to ask for your protection against evil,
Here we are today, reunited to ask for your protection
against witchcraft; against ill-health.
May you have pity on us, who have offended you,
May you pardon us, who have neglected you,
May you smile on us, who you have honoured you,
May you watch over us day and night,
Give us more children,
Give us more crops,
Give us more rain,
Give us more sun,
Give us more cocks and hens,
Give us long life.*

“Wuulee, Wuulee, Wuulee” the audience chorused.

Pa Ntoh rolled away the burial stone that lay on his great grandmother's grave. Then he took his cup, filled it with palm-wine, and poured it into the grave saying:

“Mother, take this and drink it. This is the cup of wine given to you by your children and great grandchildren. May it become for you the symbolic drink of lasting friendship.”

He passed the cup around for everyone to take a sip.

Then he took the clay pot full of smoked fish steeped in red palm-oil and said:

“Mother, take it and eat it. This is food given by your children and great grandchildren.

May it serve as lasting nourishment for you and all our ancestors.” He passed the clay pot around for everyone to eat a fish.

It was pitch dark outside when Pa Ntoh ate the last fish. He thanked his relatives again for leaving behind their various chores to be part of this very important act of communion. Everyone went home happy and at peace with themselves. That night, Dubeuh slept like a log. No dreams, no fights.

3

King of the Skies

Nah Mbiah told this story to her four children who sat staring at their mother in the glowing light of the hearth fire. It was pitch dark outside. The dry season wind whistled through the palm trees that towered over the thatched roof.

In the sparsely populated village of Bamunka where women spend the entire day cultivating farmland, evening is usually time for rest. Children await the return of their mothers impatiently because they are anxious to listen to folktales. On this particular day, Nah Mbiah narrated the tale of the deer and the toad.

"Once upon a time, King of the Skies summoned the deer and the toad to his kingdom", she started.

"King of the Skies! Who is King of the Skies?" Tewuh asked.

"You don't know King of the Skies?" Nah Mbiah asked the four-year-old boy.

"No, no! Tell us!" The four kids shouted at once.

"Well, I will tell you. King of the Skies is the father of all creation," Nah Mbiah said.

"Father of all creation! Who is father of all creation?" Beduh asked.

"You don't know who the father of all creation is?" Nah Mbiah asked the six-year-old boy.

"No! Who's he?" the child asked.

"Well, I will tell you", Nah Mbiah said.

"Who is he?" Namjong asked anxiously.

"Who is he?" Beduh insisted.

"Well, King of the Skies is *Nyi*, God Almighty!" Nah Mbiah said.

"*Nyi* is King?" the children asked in unison.

"Yes. Let me tell you the story," Nah Mbiah said.

"Okay, tell us," the kids answered excitedly.

"Once upon a time, King of the Skies summoned the deer and the toad to his kingdom." Nah Mbiah continued.

"What for?" the kids asked.

"He had to send them on an errand," Nah Mbiah said.

"An errand?" Beduh asked.

"Yes, King of the Skies wanted to send the deer and the toad on a mission", Nah Mbiah said.

"What mission? Namjong asked.

"A mission to the end of the earth," Nah Mbiah said to the eight-year-old girl.

"*Waa, Waa!*" the kids exclaimed.

"Where is the end of the earth, mother?" Namjong asked.

"You don't know where the end of the earth is?" Nah Mbiah asked.

"No, tell us. Where is it?" the kids insisted.

"Be patient children. At the end of my story, you'll know where the end of the earth is. That is the sweetest part of the story," Nah Mbiah said, wiping off wood ash from her flat feet.

"Once upon a time, King of the Skies summoned the deer and the toad to his kingdom," Nah Mbiah continued.

"We've already heard that part of the story," Tewuh said, rubbing his rosebud nose.

"What did King of the Skies tell the deer and the toad?" Nkwa asked, her green eyes wide open.

"He told them that he was sending them with a message to the end of the earth," Nah Mbiah said to the ten-year-old girl.

"What message?" Beduh asked, biting his thin lips.

"The message of life-and-death," Nah Mbiah continued, placing her hairy hands over her flat breasts.

"Message of life-and-death? What's that?" the kids questioned.

"Listen, children. King of the Skies said to the deer and the toad: I am sending you to the kingdom of human beings with this message."

"And what was the message, tell us mother!" Beduh asked.

"Don't be impatient, children!" Nah Mbiah shouted.

"King of the Skies said to the toad: Go tell humankind that there will be life after death."

"Life after death! What does that mean, mother?" Tewuh asked, pulling his jug ears.

"It means that human beings will return to life after dying," Nah Mbiah explained.

"Does it mean that human beings will not die for good?" Nkwa asked, crossing her curved legs.

"Yes, that's what it means," Nah Mbiah said.

"Yeesh! Yeesh!" The children all shouted in great excitement.

"Don't be so happy, children. That is not the end of the story," their mother said, suppressing a laugh.

"What next, mother? Tell us!" Beduh said.

"King of the skies then called the deer," she continued.

"And what did he tell the deer?" the children asked.

"He said to the deer: Go tell tell humankind that there will be no life after death," Nah Mbiah said.

"In other words, human beings will die forever?" Namjong asked, pulling a long face.

"Yes indeed. That was the message from King of the Skies to the deer," Nah Mbiah said.

"Wooh! Wooh!" the kids exclaimed in total disappointment.

"These two messages were to be taken to human beings by the deer and the toad. There was going to be a contest between the two animals," Nah Mbiah explained.

"A contest?" Nkwa asked.

"Yes. Deer and toad had to run a race. It was a marathon. Whoever arrived first at the end of the earth and delivered his message would win the race," Nah Mbiah said.

"Who won the race? Who won mother? Please tell us!" the kids were anxious to know.

"Well, as you'd imagine, while the toad trudged on, *Kuchu*, *Kuchu*^{xlvi}, like a *nyamangoro*^{xlvi}, the deer sped past him like an arrow, *swisssh!*"

"What! So the deer won the race, mother?" Beduh asked, stamping his bandy legs on the dirt floor.

"Yes, the deer ran as fast as he could, got to the end of the earth first and delivered his message to humankind. He won the race!" Nah Mbiah told her kids.

"Jeez! So when we die, we'll not live again? Namjong asked, angrily.

"We will not live again because the deer betrayed us!"

"Whoo! Whoo! How sad!" the kids exclaimed in disbelief.

"Why did the toad not run fast enough? It's the toad that betrayed human beings!" Nkwa exclaimed.

"No! It is the deer who betrayed us. Why did he run so fast?" Tewuh asked, fuming.

"I agree with Tewuh! Shouldn't we be angry with the deer for running so fast to deliver a horrible message?" Nkwa asked.

"You have a point. But remember that King of the Skies has the yam and the knife," Nah Mbiah cut in.

"I feel like going out right now to hunt and kill all the toads on this farm," Namjong said, wiping a tear from her dewy eyes.

“My daughter, a deal is a deal! We must keep the promises we make. That’s what King of the Skies did, he kept his promise,” Nah Mbiah concluded her story.

4

Charlatan

In the Sparely populated village of Nsei, subsistence farming is the mainstay of the villagers. Maize cultivation takes place twice a year. When the planting season is over, parents usually entrust the care of the farms to their teenage children who look after the crops by weeding invading plants, scaring off grain-eating birds and constructing scarecrows to keep rodents and other pests at a distance. Children look forward to this season because it is the only time of the year when they are left on their own, away from the watchful eyes of parents. During downtime they indulge in their favorite pastime: story-telling.

On one occasion, three boys tending crops in the same vicinity decided to while away time by telling their favorite tales. Hassan, Omar, and Mamadu aged 14, 13 and 12 lived in the same neighbourhood called, Ngualang.

"Once upon a time, a man named Doctor Cow lived in this village", Hassan started his tale.

"Yeehee! Yeehee! The other boys laughed provocatively."

"Why are you laughing?" Hassan asked, rubbing his shell-like ears in feigned anger.

"Doctor Cow! What sort of name is that?" Mamadu asked, wiping tears from his bloodshot eyes.

"Don't laugh buddies. This name has a long story behind it. Let me tell you," Hassan said.

"What's the story? Tell us," Omar said, placing his bony arms on his friend's bare chest.

"The man's real name was Tanko," Hassan said.

"Reeaally! Why did he change his name?" Omar asked.

"He did not change his name. Be patient! Don't be like the impatient hen who tried to hatch its eggs before they were ready," Hassan said.

"Well then, Mr. Proverbs, tell us the story," Omar said, suppressing a laugh.

"Tanko was the son of a poor farmer," Hassan continued.

"Just like us!" Mamadu chipped in.

"Yes, like us but Tanko was extremely intelligent," Hassan said.

"Is that why he was called Doctor Cow?" Omar asked.

"Ah, no! Give me a chance!" Hassan said, pulling at his curly hair.

"Go ahead, Hassan," Mamadu urged.

"After completing high school, Tanko was awarded a scholarship to study in the white man's country," Hassan said.

"*Waah! Waah!* Tanko was lucky," Hassan's friends said at the same time.

"No, my papa said that it was not luck. He said Tanko's father went to a *ngambe^{lix}* man and got some *magan^l* which helped him get the scholarship," Hassan said.

"My papa always tells me that heavens help those who help themselves," Omar said.

"Maybe that's true," Hassan said.

"What part of the white man's land did Tanko go to?" Mamadu asked.

"England!" Hassan said.

"*Wuulee! Wuulee!* England? My papa said that England is so far that it would take weeks upon weeks flying in the air like a bird to get there," Mamadu said.

"Yap, my papa said it would take two moons travelling nonstop in the white man's iron kite to get there," Hassan said.

"So Tanko travelled to England all by himself?" Omar asked.

"Yes. In spite of his father's protest Tanko travelled to England where he spent many years reading books at university," Hassan said.

"Why was his father protesting?" Mamadu asked.

"He was scared," Hassan said.

"Scared of what?" Omar asked.

"Tanko's papa was afraid that his son may one day marry a white woman and bring shame upon his family," Hassan said.

"Bring shame upon his family? Why?" Omar asked.

"Tanko's papa said he had heard that white women don't stay long in marriage," Hassan said.

"What did Tanko study when he arrived in England? Mamadu asked.

"Good question!" Omar shouted.

"Tell us what he studied in England. Mamadu said.

"My mama said that he studied vet medicine," Hassan said.

"What is vet medicine?" Omar asked.

"I don't know exactly what it is but uncle Sani who is a biology teacher, told me that a vet doctor looks after animals," Hassan said.

"What does he mean? Does he mean that a vet doctor treats animals?" Omar asked, closing his cross eyes.

"Yes, that's what uncle Sani said. He said a vet doctor treats all kinds of animals: cows, dogs, crocodiles, chimpanzees, baboons, cats, swine, goats, sheep, horses, camels and lizards," Hassan said.

"Even toads and frogs too?" Mamadu asked.

"Oh yes!" Hassan said.

"That's interesting!" Omar said, shrugging his broad shoulders.

"Upon his return to Kamerun, did doctor Tanko spend his time catching animals and curing them?" Mamadu asked.

"No, he was employed by the government to cure animals in the town of Nkambe," Hassan said.

"Oh, how nice! Did he like his job?" Mamadu asked.

"Yes he did. He lived very happily in the town all by himself, treating government cows. Then, one day something strange happened," Hassan said.

"What happened?" Mamadu asked mouth wide open.

"When Christmas day came, Dr Tanko decided to pay his parents a visit in the village of Tubah," Hassan said.

"That was good of him," Omar remarked.

"Guess what happened when Dr Tanko got to their village," Hassan said.

"He married a wife!" Mamadu said.

"No! He did not marry a wife," Hassan answered.

"He built a house for his father's animals!" Omar said.

"No! He did not build a house for his father's animals," Hassan said.

"Well, tell us what happened when he got to the village," Mamadu said.

"On Christmas eve, Dr Tanko and his parents were fast asleep when a visitor knocked on their door at midnight," Hassan said.

"At midnight! Why would someone visit at midnight?" Omar asked.

"It was Umaru, son of the village chief," Hassan said.

"Prince Umaru visiting at midnight! Why?" Omar asked.

"He had a serious problem. His son was dying of malaria," Hassan explained.

"*Agho! Agho!*^{li} He was dying?" the boys asked.

"Yes. As soon as Umaru saw Dr Tanko, he fell on his pot-belly, begging him to save his son's life," Hassan said.

"Doctor Tanko, please come quickly and save my son. He is dying! He wouldn't live if you don't help. Please come, don't delay! Only you can save him," Prince Umaru begged, wiping off abundant tears from his hooded eyes.

"I am sorry, prince. I wish I could help but I don't cure human beings," Doctor Tanko said, wiping sweat from his chinless face.

"You are not a doctor for human beings?" Prince Umaru asked, blinking repeatedly in disbelief.

"No, I don't cure human beings. I only cure animals", Doctor Tanko said.

"*Allah?* Is that true? Everyone calls you doctor but you are telling me you are not a doctor? What does that mean?" the prince asked pinching his jug-ears in frustration.

"*Allah Walahi!*^{liii} Hard to believe, my brother, but this is the truth. I am trained to cure only animals," Doctor Tanko said, shutting his door in the face of the weeping prince.

"When doctor Tanko told his eighty-eight-year-old father what had just happened, the old man passed out," Hassan said.

"*Wuulee! Wuulee!* Is that true?" the boys asked.

"Yes, he passed out. And do you know what he told his son when he regained consciousness two days later?" Hassan asked.

"No, tell us," the boys said.

"He said: 'my son you've brought shame upon this family. You spent ten years in the land of the white man

learning to be a doctor yet you cannot save the life of a dying child?"

"Hard to believe, papa, but this is the truth. In the white man's land I trained to cure animals like cows, dogs, cats, etc," Doctor Tanko said.

"Despite your big book you cannot cure the son of our own prince? How will I carry the shame?" the old man said, sighing.

"There are doctors and doctors, papa," Dr Tanko said to his father.

"Unbelievable! My son is a charlatan!" the old man said and dropped dead," Hassan said.

"This is the mother of all stories!" His friends exclaimed.

"Unbeatable!" Hassan said, smugly.

5

The Ordeal

Salamatu yawned and rolled over on her bamboo bed located in the west side of their two-bedroom house. Theirs was a typical home in the village of Sabon Gari stricken with abject poverty: thatch roof, sun-dried bricks, dirt floor, and tiny windows. It was already past midnight, yet the girl was unable to sleep. Her mind was on fire. The virginity question had stolen her sleep. Her mother's emphatic words kept ringing in her mind: "In a week's time, you will be initiated into womanhood."

Hadija was a woman of few words who meant everything she said. Salamatu knew that her mother's word was final. The girl had just turned twelve and was working hard at her baptismal classes. After completing elementary school in a public school her mother had deemed it necessary to enroll her in a catholic middle school in order to give her moral education. Our Lady of Lourdes Secondary School was a renowned institution administered by Franciscan sisters. A precondition for admission was baptism into the Catholic faith.

"We will baptize Salamatu and give her a Christian name. Then she will be admitted as a student in this school," Reverend Sister Rosamaria told Hadija.

"That's impossible, Sister. I'll not allow my child to worship a strange god."

"Who do you call strange god?"

"The white man's god, the god you worship."

"Which God do you worship, Madam?"

"The gods of my ancestors: god of the sun, god of the moon and god of the stars."

"Are you sure your daughter believes in your gods?"

"Oh, sure, she worships no other god but those of our ancestors."

"Well, if that's where you stand, then I am sorry, you'll have to take your daughter to another school."

"Why?"

"Well, because this is a Christian school where we only admit Christian children and those who are about to become Christians."

Reverend Sister Rosamaria, a tall pockmarked Scot in her mid-sixties, was a woman of her word. Conscious of her pastoral role, she visited and prayed with her parishioners in their homes, counselling them and giving them self-help tips on how to improve not only their spiritual life but also their material well-being.

Hadija was at a crossroads when she left the Reverend's office that morning. What should she do? Allow her daughter to worship a god that she did not believe in or stick to her guns?

She knew that the gods of her ancestors would punish her and cast a spell on her family if she gave in to Reverend Sister Rosamaria. No, she wouldn't do that!

As she approached her home she thought of what to tell her daughter. She knew that she would be better off with the white man's knowledge. How many times had she marvelled at the wisdom that lay in the brain that made computers, airplanes, and cars?

"My daughter, I know how much you love the white man's school. Every day I thank the gods of our forefathers for giving me a daughter who is interested in the white man's wisdom. But you have to undergo the *Umhlanga*^{liii} now."

"Mama, what's the *Umhlanga*?"

"It's a rite of passage, my daughter. To be a woman worth your salt, you have to undergo the test of virginity. The *Umhlanga* changes you from girlhood to womanhood."

"Mama, frankly I don't get it. This thing is too complicated for me. I'd rather stay clear of it."

"Stay clear? You can't avoid the test of virginity!"

"Why can't I?"

"My daughter, the *Umhlanga* is the only way that leads to womanhood. To become a woman you have to grow out of girlhood. The test of virginity enables you to do this."

"Mama, where do they perform this test?"

"My dear daughter, the test of virginity is done in a big heath in the center of the Black Forest. This is where you'll go to be initiated in two weeks."

"Who performs it?"

"Elderly women are in charge of the *Umhlanga*."

"But Mama, what actually happens there?"

"Once you are there, elderly women would shave your pubic hair, incise your private parts, and make you drink a potion from the horn of a buffalo, the cup of maturity. This ceremony transforms you into a fearless woman."

"What! They'll incise my private parts?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"This is our custom. Mutilating your private parts would instill courage in you and ensure that you stay faithful to your husband when you eventually get married."

"Aah! Aah! I am scared!"

"Fear not, my daughter. Fear nothing. We've all gone through this. Before long it will be a thing of the past."

"How long does the ritual last?"

"Twelve days."

"Mama, what about my school work? Who will do my homework for me while I am away in the Black Forest?"

"Forget about your school work for now. Initiation is very important. You can't ignore it. Our gods will curse you and bring ill-luck upon our family if you do not participate in the *Umhlanga*."

When Salamatu went to bed that night she knew that she had a tough problem to solve. She had to look for a way out.

Knowing that as soon as she was baptized in the Catholic Church the village elders would consider her impure for the test of virginity, Salamatu decided to receive the sacrament of baptism secretly without her mother's consent.

When day broke she took her bath quickly, did her morning chores, and went straight to Reverend Sister Rosamaria's office.

"Sister, I am very happy to tell you that my mother has changed her mind. She says she realizes how important baptism is for my salvation and that you should baptize me whenever it pleases you."

"Hallelujah! Praise the Lord! I am so glad that God has triumphed over Satan," said the Reverend. The following Sunday Salamatu was baptized and named Mary.

In the small village of Sabon Gari where *kongossaliv* spreads like wild fire, Salamatu's mother soon got wind of what her daughter had done. The fifty-eight-year old woman was so angry that she looked seventy. Despite all attempts by her husband, Aliyu, to calm her down, she remained upset and refused to eat for two days. On the third day she decided to let the village elders know about the misfortune that had befallen her family.

When the first cock crowed she set out for the Lamido's palace to tell her sad story to the Council of

Elderly Women. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she went down on her wobbling knees to beg for pardon on behalf of her errant daughter.

“Have mercy on her for she knew not what she was doing. She’s still a child and knows not what our customs expect of her. I tried my level best to call her to reason, but she wouldn’t listen. In the name of our forebears, I beg you to forgive my daughter. Look at me. I’m a finished woman.”

Moved by pity for Hadija, a woman of integrity, the Council of Elders granted her plea for pardon. However, she had to pay a fine of five goats, two jugs of *manjunga*^{lv}, two bags of rice and a tin of salt in accordance with the mores of the land.

6

Banga

“**Y**oung men and women are dying like flies in this village. Many have contracted the killer disease, AIDS, as a result of drug addiction. We cannot turn a blind eye to this tragedy. It is not for us to be judgemental; our task is to teach our children that healthy living will save their lives,” said Bonblanc, a diminutive balding professional mourner that lived in the village of Kurumunjang.

Bonblanc was addressing a crowd of mourners at the funeral of an 18-year-old high school student who had just died of an AIDS-related disease.

“This daughter of ours would still be alive today had she not taken to drugs,” he said, adjusting a multicoloured straw hat that partially covered his dark sunglasses.

“Our village is full of all kinds of drugs: marijuana, cocaine, LSD, heroine, you name them. Tens of thousands of our youths are being cut down in their prime of life simply because they have decided to eat nothing else but drugs”, father of the said deceased, trying hard to hold back his tears.

“There is no space left in our mortuaries. There is no land left for parents to bury children who ought to be burying them, “the Nurse lamented, wiping abundant tears from her brown eyes.

“I wonder what pushes kids into doing drugs. Two days ago, I was mourning by the coffin of a sixteen-year-old girl in the village of Mumu-Mumu, when all of a sudden eight young men, apparently drugged, rushed into

the compound wielding cutlasses, axes and knives," Bonblanc said.

"What did they want?" the Nurse asked.

"They claimed that the body in the coffin was that of their sister," Bonblanc said.

"What does that mean?" interjected an old emaciated woman who had been weeping profusely.

"I heard them say that the relatives of the girl that was about to be buried had stolen their sister's cadaver from the mortuary," Bonblanc said.

"*Tory fine tif man laugh for banda!*^{lvi} Why would anyone want to steal a cadaver?" the Nurse asked.

"Wonders shall never end! Did the people return the cadaver to the claimants?" Pa Lambi asked.

"No, they didn't."

"Why not?"

"When, the intruders forced open the coffin with an axe, they found out that the cadaver wasn't their sister's," Bonblanc explained.

"Shame onto them!" the Nurse exclaimed.

"The biggest challenge facing us in the fight against drug addiction and HIV is our own customs," Bonblanc said.

"What do you mean?" the nurse asked.

"He is right. Many traditional healers keep stressing the healing effects of marijuana and other drugs," observed Joseph Mendouze, principal of the deceased girl's school.

The tall olive-complexioned fifty-two-year old man cut the image of a heavyweight boxer at the end of his tether. He had spent twelve months holding conferences with parents of the 531 students in his school in order to find ways of educating them on the devastating effects of drugs on their children. His efforts didn't seem to be yielding good results because the student they were burying was the tenth in nine months.

"Why is talk against drug addiction not taken seriously by children in this village?" the Nurse asked.

"The problem is that some religious groups glorify drugs. For example, some people call cocaine 'holy powder'; others refer to marijuana as 'holy weed'; some call it *banga*^{viii} because of the 'big bang effect' it has on its consumers," Joseph Mendouze said.

"Well, they may call it whatever they like but the fact of the matter is that cocaine and other hard drugs are killers," Bonblanc cut in.

"I agree with you! I think the problem is ignorance. Ignorance seems to be bliss for many cultural and religious groups in this village and beyond," the nurse said.

"That's true. There's also the problem of superstition. Most of our people believe that taking a drug like cocaine would bring good luck to the consumer," the Nurse said.

"Oh yes, people believe stupid things. Some even argue that smoking marijuana would enable addicts to cast spells on their enemies," father of the deceased joined in.

Belief in witchcraft is still very common amongst our people, you know!" Joseph Mendouze said.

"Students simply scoff at me when I tell them that ten million young men and women in this country are living with HIV contracted through the use of syringes that have not been sterilized," said Jato, the deceased student's biology teacher.

"Why do they feel invulnerable to AIDS?" Bonblanc asked.

"I don't know! They are quick to use the defensive statement: 'AIDS will happen to someone else, not me.' Yet they are doing nothing at all to avoid infection," Jato said.

"This is very sad. Some youths have even come up with an evasive interpretation of the AIDS acronym: they call it African Invention to Discourage Sex," Bonblanc said.

"This is too bad! Drug addiction has reached crisis proportions in this country. In many towns and villages, graves are being recycled because there is no land left to bury the dead," said Father Basebang, the officiating priest.

"Death certificates filed by the Civil Status Office located Up Station indicate that close to twenty-five thousand young men and women have lost their lives as a result of AIDS," the nurse said.

"And those are real figures. The at-risk group is mostly teenagers. They start off by sniffing glue and before long they are into hard drugs," observed Joseph Mendouze.

"Faced with a disaster of this magnitude, there is no time to waste. Parents will have to stop shying away from their responsibilities," Bonblanc remarked.

"You couldn't have said it better! Parents must work hand in hand with teachers, social workers and health personnel on educating their children on the risks involved in drug addiction," Jato said.

7

Bobee-Tree

One afternoon, after having been sent away from school by the principal for unpaid school fees, two teenage girls decided to find a means to make money in order to pay for their schooling. Their parents had recently been killed in an inter-tribal war that had claimed close to seventy-six hundred lives in the village of Tabang-Tabang. They decided to go fishing.

"If we could catch enough fish to sell, there will always be people ready to buy it," Leghu said to her friend, Fonge.

The following morning the girls set out for the Ngoketunjia River. It was a long walk from home. To kill time they told stories.

Fonge told the story of an eighty five year-old man who lived in the Tabang-Tabang village.

"Pa Ndula was a terrible man," she said, cleaning dust from her hazel eyes.

"What do you mean?" Leghu asked.

"Can you imagine an old man so greedy that he wouldn't offer a visitor a cup of water to drink?"

"Hmmm, that's really bad. My dad told me that generosity is a virtue," Leghu said, whipping a tear from her pink eyes at the mention of her father.

"And that's not all! Fonge continued.

The girls were now sitting on the banks of the river, monitoring the frolicking movements of the myriad fishes in the clear water.

"What else did Pa Ndula do?" Leghu asked, placing her bow legs on a piece of drift wood in front of her.

"He used to hide food under his bamboo bed each time he was eating and heard foot steps at his door."

"Are you joking or what?"

"No, no, I am serious! He did that all the time!"

"Terrible!" Leghu exclaimed.

"Oh yea, my mama said he even did that once when his own grandson who works in a government office in Douala came to pay him a visit," Fonge said.

"What! I think that's shameful, especially for a man of his age. I believe that grandparents should always be nice and generous to everyone," Leghu said, rubbing her flat nose.

"Not Pa Ndula, the old miser! It seems to me that his motto was 'everyone for himself and God for us all'," Fonge said.

When it was Leghu's turn to tell a tale, she told the story of the *bobee*-tree. She had heard it from her grandma.

"In our grassfields culture, when a girl is born, a tree is planted in their backyard," Leghu said, brushing off a mosquito that had settled on her bony arm.

"What type of tree is planted?" Fonge asked anxiously.

"The *bobee*-tree," her friend replied.

"What type of tree is that?"

"You don't know what a *bobee* is?"

"No, I don't. What is it?"

"Well, in our vernacular, *bobee* stands for a woman's breasts."

"So a *bobee*-tree is a breast-tree?"

"Yes, that's what it is."

"I see. So, why is the *bobee*-tree planted?" Fonge asked, her rose-bud lips wide apart.

"This tree controls the growth of the girl's breasts from the day it is planted," Leghu said.

"You must be kidding!"

"No, I am not."

"Hmmm, that's a strange custom," Fonge said.

"Oh well. In fact, some liquid from the tree is poured into the girl's mouth at birth. As a result, her breasts grow at the same pace as the bobee-tree," Leghu explained.

"What if the bobee-tree continues to grow? Will the girl's breasts continue to grow as well?" Fonge asked.

"No, once her parents are satisfied with the size of her breasts, they'll chop down the tree and her breasts will stop growing."

"Hmmm, now let's imagine that after planting the bobee-tree, a rainstorm came at night and washed it into the Ngoketunjia River or the Sabga River. What would happen to the girl's breasts?" Fonge asked.

"I don't know!" Leghu said.

"Worse still, what if the river carried the tree to a far-off land and threw it onto a fertile bank somewhere and the bobee-tree continued to grow there. What would happen to the girl's breasts?" Fonge asked.

"Good question, my friend! If that happened, I wonder how the girl's parents would stop the growth of her breasts," Leghu said.

"They may not even know where the tree is," Fonge said, touching her pointed breasts, probably wondering if her deceased father had remembered to cut down her bobee-tree.

"My friend, I think I will ask my grandma this question the next time I pay her a visit," Leghu said.

8 Lord of the Harem

Hassana hadn't slept a wink the whole night. The harder she tried to catch sleep, the further it escaped her tearful eyes. How could she sleep when her marriage was at stake? Her husband's worrisome words kept ringing in her mind.

"Hassana, next week there will be a new *ngondere*^{lviii} in this compound. Do you hear me? Soon you and Safiatou will have a younger pair of hands to help you run the affairs of this compound."

Buba said this to his first wife a week prior to his third wedding. That was six months following the birth of Hassana's seventh daughter, Halimatu. Disappointed by seven deliveries that had turned out to be all girls, the man had decided to take a third wife in the hope of fathering a male child. Hassana had wanted to raise her voice against what she saw as a breach of marriage contract but had been sternly rebuked by her seventy-year-old mother who had cautioned her against the ill-fate of women who call into question the authority of their men.

"My daughter, a woman who talks back to her husband is worse than an *akwara*^{lix}," the old woman said to her daughter.

Convinced that sharing her husband with other women was better than having none, Hassana had heeded her mother's advice. What troubled her was Buba's decision to get married to a *jeune talent*^{lx}, young enough to be his daughter.

"Baba Halimatu, are you a man?" Hassana asked her husband, looking directly into his blue eyes. Buba sat

on the edge of his wife's bamboo bed staring at her as if he wanted to eat her up.

"Woman, are you out of your mind or what? What sort of question is this?" Buba retorted, visibly upset.

"Answer me, Baba Halimatu. It is a simple question," Hassana persisted, wearing a frown on her doll-like face.

"Yes, I am a man! Father of seven children! Is that the answer you wanted?" Buba stammered, adjusting the embroidered hat on his *kongolibon*^{lxi} head.

"No Baba Halimatu. I don't believe you're a man." Hassana answered back.

"Shut up your dirty mouth, foolish woman! Is something wrong with your head? If I am not a man, what am I? Tell me!" Buba yelled.

"Calm down, please calm down, Baba Halimatu. There is nothing to be upset about," Hassana said, closing her hazel eyes.

"I should calm down? You've just insulted me, and you want me to calm down? *You di craze for your head!*"^{lxii} Buba shouted.

"Baba Halimatu, I've not asked you this question in order to make you feel bad but to make you see the foolishness in your decision," Hassana said.

"The foolishness in my decision? What decision are you talking about?"

"Your decision to wed Habiba."

"Why is taking Habiba as a wife a foolish decision?"

"Baba Halimatu, be serious. This girl is younger than your own daughter! Besides, she is Halimatu's friend and classmate."

"So what?"

"So what! What do you think Halimatu is going to think of her father getting married to her own classmate? Isn't that a shame? Are you a father at all?"

"I don't know if I am a father at all. Only you can tell me if I am the father of your seven daughters!"

"Oh, ho! My seven daughters! They are my daughters, not yours, *ko!*

"Woman, I've had enough of your nonsense! We've been married now for fifteen years yet there is no son in this compound! Who will inherit my property when I go to meet my ancestors?" Buba screamed, shaking with rage.

"Oh, ho! Is it my fault that we don't have a male child? If you are no longer here, Halimatu will inherit your property," Hassana retorted.

"*Karamba!* God forbid! Since when did girls start inheriting property in this village?"

"Why not? Why can't Halimatu inherit your property? Is she not your child?"

"She is my child but she's a girl. A girl cannot be *chopchair*^{lxiii}, you don't know that?"

"When are we going to throw away these odd customs that are hindering our progress?"

"What customs are you calling odd?"

"The customs of your people. It is not fair to treat the girl child as an underclass human being," Hassana said, biting her bulbous lips.

Sensing that the argument was leading nowhere, Buba left his wife and walked to his own hut as if there were bees in his head. Hot sweat ran down his thick neck. A few moments later, he returned to his wife's hut brandishing a *Mulongo*^{lxiv} in her face.

"Woman, I've come to tell you that my marriage with Habiba is not a subject for discussion. Arrangements have been made. This time next week she will be in this compound as my third wife. Neither you nor Safiatou can bear me a male child; I will take Habiba who will give me an heir. If you don't like it, you can pack your things and leave!" Buba said, giving his wife a fiendish look.

"I hear you, *Masah*^{lxv} but I want to let you know that this marriage is going to be a sham and I refuse to put up with it. You'll have to choose between me and Habiba."

"Choose between you and Habiba! *Puaah!*" Buba spat in his wife's face.

"Yes, if she's in, I'm out!" She said, cleaning off the spittle with the back of her right hand.

"Why don't you leave right now? Leave now!" Buba screamed, landing multiple lashes of the *whip* on his wife's bare back and face.

Blood oozed from her nostrils as she fell down and lost consciousness.

The commotion in Hassana's hut brought Safiatou running to the scene.

"What is the matter Baba Halimatu? Why are trying to kill Hassana? Leave her alone! She has done nothing wrong," she shouted.

"Woman, shut up that large mouth or else you'll eat the mulongo too!" Buba said, brandishing the woven hide in her direction.

Sensing danger Safiatou tiptoed back to her hut. The childless woman had been married to Buba for six years.

When darkness fell, Hassana regained consciousness. Throwing her veil over her bruised face, she crossed twenty-one rivers to get to the Fon's palace.

"Greetings to you, Your Royal Highness," Hassana said, wiping abundant tears from her eyes.

"Peace be upon you, my daughter. What brings you to the palace at this time of the night?" the Fon^{lxvi} asked, adjusting the *ndikong*^{lxvii} cap that concealed his balding head.

"Your Royal Highness, my husband wants to kill me," Hassana said, sniffing a couple of times.

"Kill you! Why? Why would a husband want to kill his wife? Did you disagree with him on something?" the Fon asked, visibly confused.

"Yes, Your Royal Highness."

"What did you disagree on?"

"Your Royal Highness, my husband says I am a worthless wife."

"Why did he say that? Did you refuse to cook good *fufu* for him?"

"No, Your royal Highness. I cook delicious *fufu* and *njama-njama*^{lxviii} soup for him everyday."

"Did you refuse to give him warm water to bathe?"

"Not so, Your Royal Highness, I bathe and scrub his back with *kuncha*^{lxix} every night before we go to bed."

"Did you refuse to satisfy him in bed?"

"No, Your Royal Highness, we make love whenever he wants it."

"If you have done all these things to your husband, why then does he want to kill you? Tell me the truth. Where there is smoke there is fire," the Fon said.

"My husband says I'm *ashawo*^{lxx}."

"Why did he say that?"

"He says it is my fault that he does not have an heir."

"Why is it your fault? A woman does not make children! Only *Nyi*, Almighty King of the Skies, knows where children come from."

"His Royal Highness is right, but my husband blames the lack of a son in the family on me."

"Worry not, my daughter, please return home. I'll send for him and we'll get to the bottom of this matter."

"Thank you *Mbeh*^{lxxi}, I'll go back home. May *Nyi* add many more moons to your reign over this village."

"Go well, my daughter. If you hit your foot against a stone, let that stone break into several pieces."

"May many more suns shine upon the palace, *Mbeh*," Hassana said, rising to leave.

It was long past midnight when she entered her hut. Her daughters had fallen asleep on the straw mat on the dirt floor having waited for her in vain. After beating the dust off her flat feet, she lay down beside her children, tired but unable to sleep. When the first cock crowed she was still wide awake. Suddenly she heard the sound of footsteps at her husband's door. Peering through the bamboo door, she saw two silhouettes standing in front of her husband's door. They were wearing masks made out of raffia fibre smeared with camwood. Before she could blink she heard one of them uttering a summons to her husband.

"The Fon mandates us to bring you to the palace right now."

"Why does the Fon want me in the palace at this time of the day?" Buba asked, shaking like a plantain leaf in the dry season wind.

"Sir, no one has the right to call into question the Fon's orders. You have the choice of leaving willingly or forcefully!" the mask admonished.

Jumping around as if he had butterflies in his stomach, Buba threw his *baban riga*^{lxxii} over a pair of baggy trousers, slung his sheath of bows and arrows over his right shoulder, and followed the Fon's messengers. He kept adjusting five spears and a sharpened machete that lay on his left shoulder. In his *kwo meunong*^{lxxiii} full of gris-gris^{lxxiv}, protruded a sharp knife. He was dressed for combat because he didn't know what awaited him in the palace.

When they arrived at the palace, the messengers led him into the Fon's inner room, reserved for hearing serious cases.

"Your Royal Highness, here is the man you sent for," the second mask said, pushing Buba to face the Fon.

"Peace be upon you, young man," the Fon said, turning his *kokeuh*, the royal stool, to face Buba.

He was stunned by the paraphernalia in the palatial courtroom. In the West end of the room the floor was strewn with several statuettes of deceased chiefs of the village. In the East end, there were skulls of lions and elephant tusks killed many years ago by valiant master hunters. Dried skin of hyenas and boa constrictors hung on the brick walls.

"Take a seat, young man," the Fon said pointing to a stool made out of the trunk of a baobab tree.

"*Ndoh!*" Buba thanked the Fon as he perched on the edge of the stool, shivering with fear.

"Man, I hear you're having trouble with your wives, is that correct?"

"*Cheh*^{lxxv}, that's correct."

"What is it that is causing trouble in your home?"

"*Mbeh*, I've been married now for fifteen years without a male child to look over my compound when I go to meet my ancestors," Buba said, tears welling in his *ngengerou*^{lxxvi} eyes.

"How sad!" the Fon said, shaking his oblong head.

"Your Royal Highness, that is the cause of all the trouble in my compound."

"I understand, a man without an heir is like an elephant without a tusk."

"*Cheh, cheh*. I feel like a cow without a tail."

"Rightly so! But let me say this to you: a man may change night into day in order to have a male child, if King of the Skies says no, there's nothing he can do."

"*Mbeh*, I hear what you're saying."

"A man may dig into his wife as far as his tool can go but if *Nyi* says no to a male child, there is nothing he can do."

"*Mbeh*, I hear you well. What bothers me in all this is the fact that my two wives will not allow me take a third wife."

"Why not? It is not a woman's place to decide when her husband should take another wife."

"That's what I've been telling them but they wouldn't listen."

"My son, a woman is like hot soup, you must take her slowly and slowly from the edges."

"I'm listening, *Mbeh*."

"You better listen. If you want to eat honey from a beehive, you must be prepared for the sting of bees," the Fon said, crossing his bandy legs.

"*Mbeh*, many thanks for your words of wisdom," Buba said.

"Be wise in the way you rule your compound. Polygamy can be a challenge if you lack wisdom."

"*Mbeh*, I have often wondered how you rule this palace full of wives and children."

"Patience and perseverance are my weapons. Young man, it takes a lot of patience to attend to the needs of forty wives and seventy-seven children," the Fon said, sighing.

"I'll heed your advice, *Mbeh*. I now realize that my biggest shortcoming has been impatience."

"Well, realizing a problem is the beginning of the solution. Go home and be prudent. Let this be the first and last time you're summoned to this palace," the Fon said.

"*Cheh, cheh*," Buba said, rising to leave.

"Go well. If *Nyi* refuses to give you a boy, let your wisest daughter be your heir. It is high time I changed this custom. We have had too many broken homes in this village on account of the succession question," the Fon said, rising to leave.

"*Cheh, cheh*, may the gods of Ngoketunjia and of Ngombi prolong your reign over this land," Buba said, stretching his knock-knees to leave.

When he got back home at midday, his wives and daughters had gone to weed the corn farm at Batula, located forty-two rivers away from home. He waited patiently for them to return. At nightfall he heard footsteps outside. Smiling from ear to ear, he ran out of his hut to embrace his wives and children.

"Welcome back from work, he said helping Hassana take down the heavy bundle of firewood from her head.

"Thank you, Baba Halimatu; you seem to be in high spirits today, Hassana said, forcing a smile.

"Ho! Ho! Once in a while a man has to show his wives he loves them," Buba said, helping Safiatou take down her bundle.

When everyone had rested enough, Buba invited his wives and children to his hut. Looking at one another with inquiring eyes his wives and daughters entered the inner room of the hut and sat down on bamboo chairs.

"Halimatu!" Buba called.

"*Yeuh!*"^{lxxvii} the eldest daughter answered.

"Go to the henhouse, catch the two fattened hens, and bring them to your mother."

"Are we going to have a *sataka*^{lxxviii} tonight?" Hassana asked.

"Yes, a real *sataka!*" Buba responded, a grin on his heart-shaped face.

"Is the *ngondere* coming tonight?"

"No, no! It is not the *ngondere* we're celebrating."

"So what are we celebrating?" Safiatou asked.

"You'll soon know the reason for the feast. Be patient. You both should go and cook *water-fufu*^{lxxix} and *achu*^{lxxx} while I slaughter the fowls," Buba said to his wives, taking out a sharp knife from his bag.

While they were still eating the sumptuous meal, Buba stood up in the midst of his wives and daughters and made an unexpected speech.

"Beloved wives and children, before I say one word, I want to beg your pardon. Forgive and forget all the wrong things I've done to you," he said in a solemn voice.

There was grave-yard silence in the audience. Amazed at the sudden change in the commanding tone of the compound head, they listened intently.

"Dear wives and children, the river will never flow upstream unless *Nyi* ordains it. What I'm about to say tonight has never been said in the history of this village," he continued.

No one spoke or coughed in the audience.

"If I ever went on a journey of no return, let Halimatu be my heir."

The dead silence that followed this announcement showed that Buba's wives and daughters had not understood what he had just said.

"If I ever cross to live in the land of the dead, let Halimatu rule this compound," Buba said again, wearing a broad smile.

Yelelele-oh! "Yelelele-oh! Halimatu!

Boum-bambam! Boum-boum! Boum-bambam!

Yelelele-oh! "Yelelele-oh! Boum-bambam!

Yelelele-oh! "Yelelele-oh! Halimatu, chop-chair-oh!

Boum-boum-bambam! Boum-bambam! Halimatu, chop-chair-oh!

Kindintেকে... Kindintেকে... Kindintেকে... Kindindintেকে!

The entire family had broken into frenzied song and dance in celebration of the emancipation of the girl child. Buba beat the tam-tam like he had never done before. The jubilation in honor of Halimatu, heir-apparent, ended at midnight. That night Hassana slept like a log of wood.

9

Afoa-Kom

“Wake up! Bobe wake up!” Nawain Nangeh said, trying to nudge her husband out of a deep slumber.

“What’s the matter? Why are you waking me up at this time of the night, eh?” Shall I ever have a moment of peaceful sleep in this house?” Bobe Nkwain said, robbing his green eyes.

“Didn’t you hear the Qwifon^{lxxx} gong?” Nawain Nangeh asked.

“The Qwifon gong? Did you hear the beating of the Qwifon gong at midnight? Are you dreaming or what?” Bobe Nkwain asked, staring at his wife in disbelief.

“No, I am not dreaming, I heard the Qwifon gong with my own ears. Listen, you’ll hear it,” she said.

“*Kingking! Kingkong! “kingking! Kingkong! Kongkong! Kingking Kongking! Kingkong!”* the gong sounded again.

Bobe Nkwain threw away the threadbare blanket that covered his lanky legs and jumped out of his bamboo bed, stark naked. He was terrified. The Qwifon does not beat the gong at midnight for nothing. Something terrible must have happened.

“The last time the gong was heard at midnight was when the people of Kejem Keku attacked our people in their sleep. That was thirty years ago,” he said to his wife.

“What does this gong mean Bobe?” his wife asked, looking scared.

“Woman, the sound you heard is a rallying call.”

“Rallying call? Who is rallying who?”

“The Qwifon is summoning all the *Kungheuh*^{lxxxii} to the palace,” the man said.

"So you are leaving for the palace right now?"

"Yes, I must go. No *kungh*^{lxxxiii} sleeps after hearing the beating of the Qwifon gong."

"You really mean you have to cross fourteen rivers in the heart of darkness to get to the Fon's palace just because the Qwifon has sounded the gong?" Nawain asked, yawning in despair."

"Woman, I have no choice. The head that wears the red feather and a porcupine quill knows no sleep," Bobe Nkwain said, jumping into his *Ndikong* outfit.

Before the early morning cock crowed, the titleholder had already crossed ten rivers. Four separated him from Fon Wallang's palace. He was dressed for war not knowing what to make of this unexpected call. Two spears hung from his left shoulder, a bow and sheath of arrows lay on his right shoulder. A sharp knife protruded from his goatskin bag bedecked with amulets.

When he arrived at the palace six other *Kungheuh* and the Fon were waiting for him in the inner room of the Qwifon shrine. Bending almost double, Bobe Nkwain clapped his muscular hands three times before greeting the Fon.

"*Mbeh*, forgive my tardiness. Legs that have seen many moons know no speed," he said, sitting down on a wooden stool next to the Fon.

"Peace be upon you, Nkwain," the Fon said.

"Welcome, Bobe Nkwain," the other notables greeted.

"Gentlemen, our forefathers once said that smoke from a burning house cannot be hidden," the Fon said.

"*Cheh!* The notables said, nodding in consent.

"What has happened, this mouth cannot tell," the Fon continued.

"*Mbeh*, what has happened?" the notables asked at the same time.

"The Afoa-Kom is gone!" the Fon said, trembling like a banana leaf.

"Gone! Gone to where?" Bobe Jua asked, dropping down his *Shia boloh*^{lxxxiv} decorated with a red feather and two porcupine quills.

"Agoo! Agoo!" the others exclaimed, falling down on their stomachs in front of the village leader.

"Get up gentlemen, follow me to the Afoa-Kom shrine," the Fon said, leading the way into the small thatched house that had sheltered the people's guardian spirit for centuries.

"Take a look here. This is where the Afoa-Kom stood until last night," he said, pointing to the cemented hole where the statue had stood for years.

"Mbeh, who took away the Afoa-Kom?" Bobe Ngum asked.

"If I knew the answer, I would have told you," the Fon said, tears welling in his golden brown eyes.

"There's every indication someone broke in here," Bobe Jua said, pointing to a hole on the wall of the small house.

The Fon and the village elders went close to the spot and took a look at the hole. Bobe Nyongo pushed away the dry banana leaves with which someone had stuffed the hole.

"It's big enough to let through a human being," Bobe Nyongo said, heaving a sigh of desperation.

"How come I didn't see this hole when I opened the door this morning to pour libation?" the Fon said, shaking his head from left to right.

"Thieves have uncanny ways of doing things," Bobe Tubua said.

"Well, gentlemen, now that you have taken your own eyes to see the mishap that has befallen this land, what do you think we should do?" the Fon asked, staring blankly at his right-hand men.

"We have to bring back the Afoa-Kom by all means necessary," Bobe Nkwain, said.

"Yes, even if it means changing day into night," the Fon said.

"Finding the Afoa-Kom will be like trying to stop the flow of the Sanaga River with the palm of your hand but we have to do it," Bobe Kangsen said.

"If we don't find the Afoa-Kom, terrible things will continue to happen in this village," Bobe Nyongo cut in.

"I think we should consult the *Wofeh*,"^{lxxxv} Bobe Kenghah suggested.

"That's what we've got to do," the Fon agreed.

"In less than no time, the *Wofeh* will give us *magan*^{lxxxvi} that will enable us to lay hands on the thief. You can't ignore the crocodile in your water source," Bobe Tubua said, looking pensive.

"Well, gentlemen, this is time for action. A woman who keeps promising to be pregnant may die childless," the Fon said.

"*Cheh! Cheh!*" the notables acquiesced.

"Bobe Nkwain, go get a calabash of palm-wine and a bag of kola nuts from my *nchinda*^{lxxxvii} and lead the rest to *Wofeh* Ntumbi," the Fon said.

"*Cheh, cheh!*" the notable responded.

Bobe Nkwain ran into the inner room of the palace and reappeared with the items needed for consulting the soothsayer.

"Go well, gentlemen. May the ground rise to meet you, and may the wind always be behind you," the Fon said, wishing the elders a safe trip to Oku. They left for the village of Jikijem where *Wofeh* Ntumbi lived.

The octogenarian was in his sanctuary when the seven men arrived.

"I salute your bodies," the old man said, inviting them to sit down on wooden stools in his medicine shrine.

Lifting his balding head from a *ngambe-pot*^{xlxxviii} containing several concoctions, he extended a hairy muscular right hand to greet his visitors. Bobe Nkwain couldn't look into the witchdoctor's hooded eyes as he shook his hand. The others did not utter a word. The paraphernalia that lay in disorder in the *medicine-house* scared them stiff. On the floor lay two empty human skulls, the teeth of a baboon, the hide of a boa constrictor, cowries, camwood, tiny calabashes, and the smoked entrails of a baboon. Against the wall stood four elephant tusks.

"What brings the notables of Bello to Jikijem today?" the witchdoctor said, gnashing his uneven teeth.

"Pa Ntumbi, our house is on fire," Bobe Ngwain said.

"Whose house is on fire?" The *ngambe-man* asked.

"The Afoa-Kom is lost!" Bobe Kenghah said.

"The Afoa-Kom is lost! What do you mean?" Was it burnt?" The *Wofeh* asked.

"No," Bobe Kangsen responded.

"Was it stolen?" the witchdoctor queried.

"We don't know. That's why we're here," Bobe Jua said.

"The Fon asked us to tell you to do everything possible to disclose the whereabouts of the Afoa-Kom," Bobe Nyongo said.

"The Afoa-Kom is lost! Gods of our ancestors!" The *Wofeh* exclaimed, shaking his round head repeatedly.

"I am afraid we'll not be able to find it," Bobe Tubua said.

"Fear not! Fear nothing! Thieves may run but they'll never hide from Ntumbi!"

"*Ngiekeuleh!* The notables chorused.

"Please, help us catch the thief," Bobe Tubua entreated.

"I will look into this matter right away. The shoulder will never grow taller than the head," the soothsayer said, opening a black fibre bag full of dried bones and cowries.

Squatting on the floor, he threw down the bones in front of his visitors. Narrowing his eyes, without saying a word, he jumped up as if stung by a wasp. He made a few dance steps, muttering incantations. He sat down on the dirt floor again, crossed his bandy legs, and pulled out a clay pot from under his bamboo bed. Placing it on the hearthstones that stood in the middle of the sanctuary, he poured brackish water into it and uttered some more incantations. Then silence fell. It looked as if the old man had gone into a trance. Suddenly, he opened his eyes, scratched his balding head, and beckoned to the men.

"Come here! Come close to this pot and take a look."

Panic-stricken, the men took a couple of wobbling steps toward the pot and looked into it.

"What do you see?" The *Wofeh* asked.

"I see the image of a man," Bobe Nkwain responded.

"Take a second look. Try to see what he is carrying on his left shoulder," the soothsayer said.

Bobe Jua took a steady look into the murky water. Suddenly, he screamed.

"That's the Afoa-Kom! I can see it on the man's left shoulder!" he shouted, making way for his peers to see for themselves.

"Yes, that's the Afoa-Kom!" they chorused.

"Do you recognize the man carrying the Afoa-Kom?" Wofeh Ntumbi asked.

The seven men rubbed their eyes and took a closer look into the *ngambe-pot*.

"It's Noh Keumbah!" Bobe Tubua shouted.

"Yeeess! It's him! Gods of our forefathers!" Bobe Nkwain shouted.

Noh Keumbah was known to everyone in the village of Bello and its environs. The village was awash with hair-raising stories about the kleptomaniac. One story recounted how he had stolen a dead child at the local maternity while the bereaved parents were signing papers for the release of the corpse for burial. According to another tale, Noh Keumbah had stolen a plastic bag from the purse of young woman in a beauty-shop only to discover later that the bag contained nothing but the woman's used menstrual pads.

After giving the *Wofeh* a bag of kola nuts and a calabash of palm-wine as payment for his services, the notables thanked him profusely and left for Bello.

"*Mbeh*, we have good news for you," Bobe Nkwain said, on their arrival at the Fon's palace.

"What's the news?" the Fon asked, grinning.

"We now know the man who stole our guardian spirit," Bobe Nkwain said, a smile on his thick lips.

"Who is the thief?" Fon Wallang asked anxiously.

"It's Noh Keumbah, the notorious thief in this village," Bobe Nkwain said.

"Noh Keumbah! Gods of Ngoketu! The pig has the temerity to steal the very heart of the village!" The Fon screamed, tapping his flat feet on the ground.

"Yes, *Mbeh*. *Wofeh* Ntumbi showed us Noh Keumbah in his *ngambe-pot*. We saw him with our own eyes," Bobe Jua said.

"He'll pay for his deed! No matter how long a bird perches in the baobab, it doesn't forget that the nest it hatched in is down in the bush. Thank you for a job well done," the Fon said, waving goodbye to his lieutenants.

That night Fon Wallang did not sleep a wink. How could he sleep when the very soul of the village was away? Lying wide awake in his mahogany bed he pondered what

punishment was commensurate with the gravity of Noh Keumbah's felony. When day broke, he sent four masked messengers to the home of the thief, enjoining them to bring him to the palace dead or alive. The four masqueraders set out early in the morning armed to teeth. Each carried four spears, two sharp cutlasses, a bow and arrows, and a sharp knife.

Noh Keumbah was drinking his *Kunu*^{lxxxix} mixed with *banga* when the masks knocked on his door.

"Noh Keumbah, father of the land wants you at the palace, right now!" One of the men said, pointing a spear in his face full of scars.

"Why would the Fon want me at the palace at his time of the day?" He asked, trying to be obstinate.

"Man, we've not come to negotiate. We're here to take you to the palace. Get up and follow us!" The second mask hollered.

The thief smelt *arata*^{xc}. Jumping around his house like a chicken without a head, he grabbed his *boubou*^{xi}, threw it over a pair of tight-fitting khaki trousers, and followed the masks. When they arrived at the palace, they led him into the Fon's inner room reserved for hearing cases of treason. The seven notables had returned to the palace at the behest of the Fon. They devoured the thief with hateful eyes. Noh Keumba's bulging eyes darted from one notable to the other. The twenty-eight-year-old man was so scared he looked forty.

"*Mbeh*, this is the man you sent for," one of the masks said, pushing Noh Keumbah in front of the Fon who sat surrounded by the notables.

After coughing twice to clear his throat the Fon broke the dead silence.

"Noh Keumba, an ill-wind brings you to this palace," the Fon said, gnashing his brown teeth.

"An ill-wind, *Mbeh*?" the thief asked feigning innocence.

"Yes, a grave matter brings you here. I urge you to speak the truth, and nothing but the truth," the Fon said, looking straight into his red eyes.

"That's right, we ask you to speak the truth. Our forefathers said that a lie has the devastating power of a tornado," Bobe Jua chipped in.

"Remember that truth saves, young man. The grave is too shallow to contain the truth", Bobe Nyongo cut in.

"Truth is like red hot pepper, it will hurt the eyes but will not pull them out of your head," Bobe Ngum added.

"Noh Keumba, an important object is missing from this palace. Do you know where it is?" the Fon asked, stroking his graying beard.

"What's missing?" he asked.

"The Afoa-Kom has been stolen," the Fon said.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said, blinking his eyes repeatedly.

"Man, I urge you to stop playing with fire," the Fon said, wagging a telltale finger at him.

"If you continue to act like the tortoise, we'll show you pepper," Bobe Kangsen added his voice to the admonitions, brandishing his fly whisk in front of the man's face.

"The Afoa-Kom, our guardian spirit has been stolen. Do you know where it is?" the Fon asked again.

"In the name of my late father, I swear I don't know what you are talking about," Noh Keumba denied again.

Fuming with anger, the Fon shouted at the top of his stentorian voice, ordering his *dongari*^{xcii} to strip the man naked. The four eunuchs, who had been standing guard behind the Fon, fell on the suspected thief, threw him on the ground, and stripped him to his underpants. The torture maniacs grabbed five *mulongo* each. They were all dressed in red tunics bedecked with *gris-gris*^{xciii} and tiny mirrors.

"Come out here!" The first eunuch shouted, pulling Noh Keumba out of the room onto the palace square. The second one pushed him so hard he tripped over a chair and fell flat on his pot-belly.

"Get up, dirty pig! You reap where you didn't sow!" The third *dongari* thundered.

The four men tied Noh Keumba to a baobab tree that stood in the middle of the palace courtyard. When the first *dongari* swang round three times before administering forty lashes on the thief's ant-hill buttocks, he roared like a gored lion.

"He's going to kill me! Help! Help!" he wailed.

"Keep your big mouth shut!" The second *dongari* shouted, steeping his *mulongo* in wet sand.

Noh Keumba was bathing in his own blood by the time the second man finished his assignment.

"Stop! Stop! Don't kill me, I'll tell you where the Afoa-Kom is," he said, weeping like a child.

"Let him speak," the Fon said, nodding his *kongolibon* head.

The torturers stopped abruptly.

"Tell us, where's the Afoa-Kom," the Fon asked.

"The Afoaaaa...Koom is with the white man?" he stuttered.

"The Afoa-Kom is with the white man? Which white man?" The Fon asked, quaking with rage.

"I sold it to the white man of Mbenge," he said.

"*Nyam fuka*!^{xciv} You sold the heart of this village to a *mukala*,"^{xcv} Bobe Jua yelled.

"You'll pay for your deed with your own blood!" Bobe Ngum threatened.

"Where does the white man live?" the Fon asked, trying to stay calm.

"I don't know where he lives," the thief said.

"What's his name?" Bobe Nkwain asked.

"I don't know his name," the thief said.

"Bush beef! Are you in your right mind? You do business with someone without asking his name?" Bobe Nyongo asked.

"The business was done at night. He told me that he worked with the ambassador of Cefran in Yaoundé, I am telling you the truth," he confessed.

"Swine! You've committed an abomination against this village!" The Fon said, breaking his staff on the thief's head, *gwang!*

"*Woh-he! Woh-he!*" he cried, whipping abundant blood from his injured forehead.

"What's the fate of a worthless creature like this?" the Fon asked, facing his notables.

"He should be hanged right away!" Bobe Jua said.

"He should be declared persona non grata in this village," Bobe Nkwain suggested.

"He has brought shame upon us! He can't live in this village any more," Bobe Ngum cut in.

"He should leave! A leopard will never lose all its spots," Bobe Kangsen said.

"He should be thrown into the Ngoketunjia River. Let him be food for the crocodiles. If you lie down with dogs, you'll get up with fleas," Bobe Tubua added.

"Let's cleanse this land by getting rid of this vermin," Bobe Kangsen opined.

"This beast doesn't belong here. The limit of an animal is its tail," Bobe Kangsen said.

"If a man does not know where he belongs, let him be told where to go," Bobe Nkwain said, wiping tears from his reddened eyes.

"Pus from the abscess in your throat can only descend into your stomach," Bobe Nyongo added.

"You do not cry for help when the knife that you have on your belt pierces you on your hip. Let him leave the village right now!" the Fon said.

"Cheh! Cheh!" The notables concurred.

That's how Noh Keumbah's fate was decided. He had wronged the people of Bello and had to be sent on exile.

"Put on his clothes," the Fon said to his *dongari*.

In less than no time, the eunuchs had untied the ropes with which they had tethered the man to the baobab tree. They dressed him up.

"Take him to the outskirts of the village; tie a big stone onto his neck so that anyone who sees him will know that he has committed a felony. Let him leave this village never to return!" the Fon commanded.

"I've a wife and two children. Maybe I go and say goodbye to them," the thief asked, tears streaming down his swollen cheeks.

"No! You can't! An Afoa-Kom thief is an outcast. You must leave right now!" the Fon said, without looking at him.

As soon as the thief and the *dongari* were out of sight, the Fon and the notables went back into the inner room of the palace.

"What shall we do to replace this immense loss?" Fon Wallang asked his lieutenants.

"What we should do, I believe, is to have the village carver make a surrogate Afoa-Kom. We can't live without our guardian spirit," Bobe Nkwain said.

"What if we find the Afoa-Kom later?" Bobe Jua asked.

"That's a good question. Which one shall we worship if we find the old one?" Bobe Tubua asked.

"Gentlemen, can we live without Afoa-Kom? That's the question. Leave the future to the future," the Fon said.

"Cheh! Cheh!" The notables chorused.

"Let's go ahead and have the carver make a replacement for the missing Afoa-Kom. If we find the old

one, we'll decide what to do with the young one," the Fon said.

"*Cheh! Cheh!*" The men answered in unison.

Two moons had passed since the Fon asked the village carver to replace the stolen Afoa-Kom. It was a *kontry Sunday*^{xcvi} when the short fifty-five-year-old man arrived at the palace, carrying the statue on his right shoulder. He had the fresh leaf of a date-palm stuck between his lips so that passersby would know that he must not be spoken to. The statue was about four feet tall, all smeared with camwood. A string of *jigida*^{xcvii} hung on its broad waist; its stout neck was decorated with a necklace made of cowries.

"May the gods of Kom and the goddesses of Ngo grant you long life," the Fon said, giving the carver two white roosters, a black sheep, a calabash of palm-oil and a bag of salt as payment for a job well done.

He poured libation and blessed the new guardian spirit. That night the entire village slept peacefully. No one heard the footsteps of roaming *dodani*, evil spirits that had made life a nightmare for the villagers since the disappearance of the Afoa-Kom. No cock crowed at midnight. Nobody heard the roaring of a lion at dusk. No woman met with a two-headed leopard on her way to the farm. No child trying to fetch water was pulled into the stream by invisible hands. These strange happenings had been the lot of the people of Bello following the disappearance of the Afoa-Kom.

One day, Fon Wallang was basking in the sun in front of his palace when a black Mercedes car screeched to a halt in front of the baobab tree. A stout white man in his mid-forties wearing a black three-piece suit came out of the car and stretched his right hand to greet the Fon.

"I don't shake hands with ordinary men," the Fon said, asking the man if he'd missed his way.

"No, I've not missed my way. My name is Jean La Fontaine. Are you Mr. Wallang?"

"No, I'm not Mr. Wallang," the Fon said, visibly upset.

"Who are you?" The white man asked, holding his hooked nose in the air.

"Who are you looking for?"

"I am looking for the chief of this village."

"I am Fon Wallang, paramount chief of Kom, and who are you, sir?"

"I am the cultural attaché of the Cefran embassy in Yaoundé," the *mukala* spoke through his nostrils.

"And what brings you to my palace?" The Fon asked, taking offence at the whistling sounds the white man produced as he spoke.

"Mr. Wallang, I beg your pardon, Fon Wallang, I am here with a parcel from the Ambassador of my country for you," the man said.

"What parcel?" The Fon asked.

"Wait a minute, I'll be back," the man said, running back to his car.

By the time he returned, all four *dongari* were there ready for combat.

"Here's a special parcel from Ambassador Proust for you," the man said, opening a diplomatic chest he had placed in front of the fon.

Fon Wallang stood up and looked inside the silver box. To his dismay, he saw the old *Afoa-Kom* lying inside.

"Where did you get this?" The Fon asked furiously.

"A man from this village sold it to the ambassador nine months ago."

"The ambassador no longer needs it?" Fon Wallang asked.

"No."

"Why not?"

"This damned thing wouldn't give people a moment of rest in our country."

"Why not?"

"For nine months it kept singing and dancing, asking to be sent back home."

"How did your country people know it was asking to be returned home?"

"The curator of the Louver Museum where it was kept brought in an interpreter from the Kamerun embassy in Cefran to listen and translate what this shitty statue was saying."

"Stinking bastards! This is all we get from your bloody civilizing mission!" The Fon said, standing up to face the insolent white man.

"The statue is yours!" The white man said, slamming the door of his car.

"Tell Ambassador Proust that I spite in his face and in the face of the country he represents!" the Fon fumed.

That night the Fon and the notables held a meeting and resolved to keep both statues just in case something happened to one of them.

10

The Green Card

When news broke that Peter Mola and his wife Ely Nyango had won the green card lottery, they became the hottest news items around town. Their names were on every lip in the village of Ndop. Everyone wanted to know what they would be doing in the United States of America. Their relatives wanted to know where they would live and what they would eat in the white man's land. Others were interested in finding out whether their three teenage children would be able to make friends with white kids. Some poor relatives came holding their caps and headscarves in their hands asking for their own share of the lottery money.

"Ma pikin, gibe ma own moni mek I tchop before die take me go,"^{xcviii} Mola's maternal aunt said, stretching her headscarf in front of her nephew.

"Auntie, dis green card lottery whe I tchopam so no be moni,"^{xcix} Mola explained.

"Ah ah! If lotta no be moni, na wheti no ma pikin? I beg gibe ma own mek I de go me nayo-nayo,"^c the woman said.

"Auntie, you be ma mami. I no fit lie you, lottery na daso half book whe gomna for America gibe me mek I take'am enter for America,"^{ci} the young man explained.

"Mof-me-de!" Wona tchotchoro dem wona sabe wayo pass mark!^{cii} the seventy-two-year-old emaciated woman exclaimed in desperation.

"My son, will there be a furnished home waiting for you and your wife when you arrive in America?" Pa Musonge asked her son, a grin of contentment on his heart-shaped face.

"No papa, we'll have to rent or buy our own house," Mola said.

"Oh! Is that true, my son?"

"Yes, papa," Mola assured his father.

"This story is bigger than my head. So what is this green card lottery?"

"Papa, the green card is only a visa, an authorization that allows my wife, my children, and me to immigrate to the United States of America.

"Alright! I thought that our suffering was now a thing of the past since you've won the lottery," the sexagenarian said.

"No, papa. Money may come but we'll have to work for it," Mola explained.

"Is there a job waiting for you in the white man's country?" Mola's mother asked.

"No, mama. We'll have to look for our own jobs," her son answered.

"This I don't understand. You have a good job here, why go to a strange land to look for work?" His mother asked.

"I hear that America is the land of dreams," Mola explained.

"Land of dreams, my son? So when you sleep here you don't dream?" his mother asked, worried.

"Mama, what I mean is that in America, everyone can succeed. You don't need a godfather or bribes in order to succeed over there," the young man said, smiling contentedly.

"Mama, America is a land of opportunities. It is good for these children," Ely cut in.

"Wheti wona go tchop for dat farway kontry? Dem de cook fufu wet *njama-njama for deh?*"^{ciii} Mola's paternal grandmother asked.

"No grandma, *fufu wet njama-njama no de for deh but we no go die hungry. Mukala dem no de sleep wet hungry. Tchop*

de for deh. We hear say dem get plenty hamburger wet hot-dog,"^{civ} Mola explained.

"Eeeh! Eeeh! *Dat pipo dem de tchop dog!*"^{cv} the nine-year-old woman exclaimed, clapping her cupped hands thrice in disbelief.

Silence fell on the crowd that had assembled that evening to wish Mola and his family farewell to the dream-land. Mola's oldest uncle who had served in the colonial army in England advised him not to throw away the chance of a life time.

"Take a chance, my son. You may never have this opportunity again. Life belongs to those who venture. A sedentary snake never looks fresh," the elderly man said.

After having said that he invited everyone to join him in the pouring of libation. Standing up bare body but for a *sanja*^{vi} tied around his tiny waist he uttered the following incantations:

*Gods of mbolo, gods of messi, gods of mbongkoh
Goddesses of nguala, goddesses of meusoh,
Goddesses of Bekeu and of Teuloh,
We place our son, daughter, and their children in your
hands. Watch over them day and night, from strong heat,
from biting cold, from rain storms, and from hailstones.
Be their eyes and ears everywhere they go in the land of
the long noses. Help them to understand the language of
birds spoken over there. Provide them with good food to
eat. We don't want our children to eat dogs like the white
man. Give them clean water to drink. This we pray in the
name of our ancestors who have gone before us to live
forever. Yie Nyi.*^{cvi}

The next day Mola and Nyango boarded an *opep*^{cvi} bound for Yaoundé. They had to attend an immigrant visa interview at the American embassy after going through a medical examination with Dr Ben Namu, the only physician certified to perform these tests in the entire

nation. The couple arrived in Yaoundé late in the evening and passed the night with a village friend who works there.

"Massa! God don really butter wona bread-oh!"^{cix} Joe Fonkeng said, slapping the palm of Mola.

"Bro, no be na daso goodlok,"^{cx} Mola said, smiling from ear to ear.

"So how's everyone doing back in the village?"

"Everyone is doing very well. I saw your folks before leaving. They said I should extend their greetings to you," Mola said.

"Massa, my parents didn't even think of sending me some *munyondo*^{cx} and fried groundnuts from the village? You know those things are scarce here," Joe said, laughing uproariously.

"Bo, it's our fault. We informed them about our trip late last night. It was too late for them to prepare something for you. We apologize," Mola said.

"No problem, my friend. I know how excited you both are to go to America. At moments like these, one may forget even his wife," Joe said, laughing loudly.

"I hear you, my friend. Take this, it is our gift to you," Mola said, giving his friend a bundle of *bunga*.

"Thank you, thank you, eeh! My *number six*^{cxii} told me that you had something sweet from the village for me."

"We thank God," Nyango said.

"So tomorrow you will go to Dr Namu's laboratories for the medical exam and then head for the American embassy, right?" Joe asked.

"Yes, that's what we'll do tomorrow," Mola said, wishing his friend good night.

The next morning the couple took a taxi to Dr Namu's laboratories without eating breakfast as stated in the documents they had received from America. They paid their medical consultation fees of 65.000 CFA francs each at the cash registry and went inside to meet the specialist.

"I will examine your wife first, you can wait outside," Dr Namu said to Mola.

"Breath in, breath out," the physician said, running his stethoscope over the woman's pointed breasts.

"Have you ever had a miscarriage?"

"No, doctor."

"Have you ever contracted a sexually transmitted disease?"

"No doctor."

"Promiscuity is an evil."

"Yes, doctor."

"Have you ever aborted a pregnancy?"

"No, doctor."

"Life is precious."

"Yes, doctor."

"I'm done, you can dress up. You'll have your results in a half hour. Ask your husband to come in," he said to Nyango.

"Thank you, doctor."

"You may hang your clothes over there, sir," the doctor said, pointing to a hanger.

"Thank you, doctor."

"Have you ever smoked? Dr Namu asked, looking at Mola's blackened lips.

"Yes, doctor", he said, biting his thick lips.

"How long?"

"Ten years, doctor."

"Do you smoke now?"

"No, doctor."

"Good! Do you drink alcohol?"

"Yes, doctor."

"What do you drink?"

"*Jobajo*."

"How much?"

"Ten or twelve bottles a day."

"*Wew!* Alcohol kills."

"Yes, doctor."

"Have you ever had a sexually transmitted disease?"

"Yes, doctor."

"What was it you had?"

"Gonorrhea, doctor."

"Was it successfully treated?"

"Yes, doctor."

"Is there anything else you would like me to know about your health?"

"No, doctor."

"I'm done, you may get dressed. Your results will be ready in a half hour."

"Thank you, doctor."

Mola was shivering as he came out of the doctor's consultation room. The 32-year-old man was so scared he looked fifty. It was clear that he was unsure of the outcome of the medical examination. After thirty minutes, a short sturdy woman wearing abundant lipstick came out of the room adjacent to the doctor's.

"Mr. Mola!" she called.

"Present, madam", he answered like a school kid.

"Here are your results, sir. Take them to the American embassy. Do not tamper with the seal on the envelope."

"Thank you, madam," Mola said, holding his envelope tight in his quivering hands.

"Mrs. Nyango!" The woman called.

"I'm here, madam."

"Here are your results, ma'am. Take them to the American embassy. Do not mess with the seal on the envelope."

"Thank you, madam," Nyango said, following her husband out of the building.

"What do you think of the examination? She asked, throwing her lanky hands round his long neck.

"My dear, I don't know. Let's just take the results to the embassy and hear what they'll say," Mola said, a look of apprehension on his heart-shaped face.

"May I see your identity papers please," a security guard asked them as they approached the door leading to the office of the consular officer.

"Here, sir," Mola said, producing his national identity card and his wife's.

"Stand in this line. You'll be called in when it's your turn," the guard said.

Mola kept stamping his swollen feet on the ground out of impatience. They had been waiting for four hours.

"Which kind barlok be dis-eh!"^{cxiii} He said to his wife.

"I sabi sei na wheti?"^{cxiv} His wife said.

After standing for five hours in the sun Mola and Nyango were told by the security guard to go in.

"Are you Peter Mola? The consular officer asked.

"Yes, sir," Mola answered, trying to control himself.

"And this is your wife, Ely Nyango. Is that correct?"

"That's correct, sir," Mola replied.

"May I see your medical papers, please?"

"Here, sir," Mola said, giving the consular officer the two sealed envelopes.

"Please, sit down," he said, opening the envelopes one after the other.

Mola took a quick look at the huge poster behind the iroko table behind which the white man was sitting. It was the portrait of the Statue of Liberty on which were inscribed the words "Land of the free" and "Land of the great". These two sentences whetted Mola's appetite to taste of the good life in America.

"Hummm...", the officer said, his eyes riveted on Nyango's medical results.

"Is there a problem, sir?" Mola asked quaking like a cocoyam leaf in a whirlwind.

"There's a huge problem," the officer said, taping his gold pen on the table.

"What's the problem, sir?" Mola asked, breathlessly.

"Your wife has contracted a disease," the white man said.

"What kind of disease do I have, sir?" Nyango asked, closing her eyes in desperation.

"The medical results show that you have a disease called Africanosomiasis," the officer said, poring over her papers.

"Oh, oh! Papa God, where are you? Come to my rescue! What have I done wrong to you!" the woman sobbed.

"Gentleman, I'm afraid your wife will not accompany you to the United States at present," the officer said.

Mola fell down from the chair on which he had been sitting, crying as if he'd lost his both parents. His wife fell on him and they both threw themselves on the white man's feet asking to be pitied.

"Lady and gentleman, you don't have to do this. I'm not denying your wife the right to immigrate to America. As soon as she is cured of her disease she would be able to follow you to the US," the officer said to Mola.

"How long will that take, sir?" We have three children! Help us, sir!" Mola begged in tears.

"I don't know how long it will take to cure this disease, and there's nothing I can do at this point to help her. Mr. Mola here's your immigrant visa to America. Your wife will be given hers whenever she's cured," he said, asking them to leave.

The six-hour return trip to Ndop was mournful. Mola did not utter a word to his wife until they arrived at their home.

"Tomorrow we are going to see Dr Wanki," he said to his wife.

"Why?" His wife asked.

"To find out what caused this illness and what can be done to cure it as quickly as possible," he said looking at his wife helplessly.

"Alright," Nyango replied dejectedly.

The following day they were the first in front of Dr Wanki's consultation room. After waiting for two hours, a svelt nurse came out holding a register in her left hand.

"Nyango here?" She said at the top of her shrill voice.

"Yes madam," Nyango replied.

"Come in, please."

"My husband is here. May he come along?"

"No problem at all."

The couple went in and sat on cane-chairs in front of the Doctor.

"What can I do for you, lady and gentleman?"

"Doctor, we have a serious problem," Mola said.

"What is it?" the choppy doctor asked, wiping sweat from his doll-like forehead.

We've just returned from Yaoundé where we're invited to attend an immigrant visa interview at the American embassy," Mola said.

"Did you get the visa?"

"Yes, doctor. I got the visa...euh," Mola said.

"Congratulations!" Dr Wanki cut in.

"Doctor, my wife did not get hers."

"Why not?"

"The consular officer said she had contracted a disease."

"What type of disease?"

"Africanosomiasis," Mola said.

"Goodness gracious! That's a dangerous one," Dr Wanki said.

"That's why we're here, doctor. We want to find out what causes this disease and how soon it can be cured?"

"Africanosomiasis is contracted by eating white clay, especially by pregnant women. Patients react to treatment differently. In some cases it may take two years," the doctor explained.

"God Almighty! What have I done wrong? I'll kill myself! There's no use living," Nyango said, dancing up and down the doctor's room like someone suffering from diarrhoea.

"Calm down! Calm down! You can't kill yourself because of a visa to America," Dr Wanki said to Nyango.

"Do you remember ever eating white clay?" He asked.

"Yes. When I was pregnant with my third child I ate a lot of that stuff. It was caused by the pregnancy. I couldn't stop eating it," Nyango said.

"Here is a prescription for your wife, sir," the doctor said, giving Mola a sheet of pink paper on which he had written the names of several drugs to be purchased.

"Thank you very much, doctor," Mola said, wiping his tears with a red handkerchief.

"As I said, this may take a very long time. Come see me after six months," Dr Wanki said.

"Goodbye doctor," Mola said, holding his wife by the hand as they slowly walked out of the doctor's consultation room.

When Mola got home he took out his immigrant visa and checked the expiration date.

"This visa will expire in six months," he said, looking into his wife's blue eyes.

"Is that correct?"

"Yes, look at it," he said, putting the visa in Nyango's soft hands.

"This is terrible!" she said, not knowing what else to say.

"My dear, I'm going to make a suggestion. I know you're sick but we can't afford to miss the chance of a

lifetime. Let me go to America. You will follow me with our kids once you're cured of this disease. I'll get a good job in America and send you money for your medications and food for the kids. We have a home, so you need not worry about rents," Mola said, holding his head in his both hands.

"Alright, what can I say? If I can't go, at least you should go," Nyango said hopelessly.

A week later, Mola packed his bags and boxes, wished his wife and children well and headed for the Nsimalen International Airport. He had resigned from his job as senior interpreter at the Presidency of the Republic a week earlier. At the airport the immigration police told him he couldn't go to America.

"Sir, your passport is invalid. You cannot go to the United States," the fat police constable said.

"Is my passport invalid?"

"Yes sir. This passport is invalid," the officer insisted.

"I don't understand. I made this document only a month ago. If you want me to *tchoko*, just say so, *chef^{xxv}*," Mola said, taking out a five thousand CFA franc note and squeezing it into the palms of the police constable.

Without looking at it, he pushed it back into Mola's palm.

"Mr. Mola, the fiscal stamp in your passport has expired. If you want to go to America, give me two hundred thousand CFA francs," the constable said, frowning and gnashing his uneven teeth.

"*Chef*, I don't have two hundred thousand CFA francs," Mola said, opening his wallet.

"Give me all the American dollars I see there," the constable said.

"No sir, I can't give you this money. I will need it on my arrival in America," Mola said.

"Well, if I don't get all that money, you are not going to America. The ball is in your court," the policeman said refusing to stamp Mola's passport.

Sensing that talk wouldn't help, Mola reluctantly pulled out the ten twenty-dollar bills he had in his wallet and handed them over to the constable.

"You may go, sir," he said putting the money in the chest pocket of his uniform.

Mola grabbed his two boxes and handbag, left the police check-point, and headed for the Swiss Air waiting-room. After two hours, the check-in started. Mola presented his passport and visa and was about to board the aircraft when an airlines official ran after him.

'Sir, could you come back to the check-in room for a moment?"

"Me?"

"Yes, sir."

"What's the matter?" Mola asked, trying to suppress his anger.

"It wouldn't be long, sir," the officer said.

Frustrated, Mola followed him.

"Could I take a look into your handbag?" The officer said when they got back to the check-in.

"No problem."

"What's this?" The white man said holding up the horn of a buffalo decorated with cowries and porcupine quills.

"*Dis mukala dem di craze for dem head^{cxvi}. That's my ndong^{cxvii} sir,*" he said.

"What's inside?"

"Medication for stomach ache, sir."

"It looks like poison. It's so black."

"No, that's not poison sir," Mola said, dipping his finger into the *ndong* and licking it.

"You may go but make sure you don't poison anyone in America," the officer said, giving the *ndong* back to Mola.

"Dis mukala dem na mbut,"^{cxviii} he said, putting his juju back into his handbag.

After being airborne for eighteen hours, Mola arrived at the O'Hare International Airport in Chicago tired and hungry. The hustle and bustle of the city struck him dumb. Cars drove past at the speed of lightening. People talked nonchalantly at the top of their voices.

"Luki, how do you guys manage to drive in a busy city like this?" he asked his friend who had come to pick him up.

"You get used to it with time. This is America, Bro. Welcome to the United States."

"Thank you my friend. I'm glad to be here," Mola said, smiling broadly.

"Where are your kids and their mother?"

"Bro, na long long tory. I go tell you when we done reach ya long,"^{cxix} Mola reverted to Pidgin English, a lingo he manipulated with ease.

When they got to his friend's flat he told him the story of Nyango's illness.

"Massa, dem say ma woman get some sick whe dem de call'am Africanosomiasis,"^{cxx} Mola said.

"Is that why she couldn't come with you?"

"Yes," Mola said, tears welling in his brown eyes.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Massa, na small ndole dis whe I bring'am mek you take ya smell for kontry,"^{cxxi} Mola said giving his friend a bundle of green leaves from home.

"No! No! My man, I don't eat stuff like that anymore. It stinks. My wife will divorce me if she finds this stuff in this house," Luki said, putting the *ndole* away in his garage.

"Is your wife African?" Mola asked.

"No, she's American," Luki said.

"I see. She doesn't eat African food?" Mola asked.

"Bo, where do you find African food in America? In America, we eat American," Luki said, rubbing his close-cropped hair.

"Where's your wife?"

"She's at work. In America everyone works. Two pay checks per family is way to go here," Luki said.

"Massa, no be yi better pass kontry?"^{cxxii}

"Man, how can you compare apples and bananas? This is paradise!"

"No be na daso tory? How man fit take heaven begin measure'am wet hell."^{cxxiii}

Their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Megan, Luki's wife, who came in carrying boxes of spaghetti, pizza, and noodles.

"Welcome honey," Luki said, kissing his wife on her lips.

"How was your day, honey?" she asked, throwing her delicate hands over her husband's broad shoulders.

"Good. Honey, meet our friend, Mola from Africa," Luki said.

"Hello Mr. Mola!" The tall lanky blonde, said without looking at her guest.

"Hello Mrs. Luki!" Mola said.

"Call me Megan. I'm not Mrs. Luki," she said, blushing.

For two hours Luki prepared dinner while Megan lay on a couch reading a pornographic novel.

"Massa, na so wona own woman dem dei for here?"^{cxxiv}

"Wheti you mean, no?"^{cxxv} Luki asked, resorting to Pidgin English in order to keep his wife out of the conversation.

"How titi go nang for chair na masah de cook dame, no?"^{cxxvi}

"Bo, you go for Rome, mek you do how whe people for Rome dem de do'am."^{cxxvii}

"Massa, I ya you but I member say dis kan marry no go waka."^{cxxviii}

"Wheda yi waka or yi no waka, palava dey? No be na daso marry for doki?"^{cxxix}

"Marry for doki na which one no, bo?"^{cxxx}

"Marry for doki na di one whe you take American nga put for long for seka sei yi go helep you mek you get ya green card quick-quick."^{cxxxi}

"Oh! ho! Dis palava don pass me!"^{cxxxii} Mola shouted, laughing loudly.

"What does your friend find so funny, honey?" Megan asked.

"Don't mind him honey, he's been like this since childhood. Please come to the table, food is ready," Luki invited his friend and wife.

While they were eating Megan asked Mola what he'd like to do in the United States.

"I was an interpreter at home and thought I should continue in that same line of business here," Mola said.

"It may be a little difficult here," she said.

"Why?"

"Well, because you've got an accent," she said.

"What does that mean?"

"It means that you speak English differently," she said.

"I see, I thought that everyone spoke differently."

"Ya, but your accent is strong."

"Strong like what?"

"Strong like strong."

"I see, but I've got an MA in applied linguistics and interpreting," Mola said.

"It doesn't matter. Americans wouldn't understand you when you speak," Megan explained.

"Do you understand me when I speak?" Mola asked.

"Yes, I do but I am struggling," Megan said.

"Struggling to do what?" Mola asked.

"Struggling to understand you."

"Oh well, why can't other Americans make an effort to understand me like you do?" he asked.

"They are impatient," Megan said.

"So the problem is not me; it is them," Mola said.

"Maybe," she said.

"Do all Americans speak in the same way?" Mola asked.

"No, we don't but we understand one another," she replied.

"There's some truth in what Megan is saying, Mola. If you go into the interpreting business you may face challenges because of where you come from," Luki cut in.

"What do you think I should do?"

"Let's obtain a social security number for you first and we'll figure out something for you."

The following day Mola and Luki went to the Social Security administrative building to obtain a social security number. When the card arrived in the mail a week later, Luki advised his friend to swallow his pride and get a factory job to begin with.

"You've got a wife and kids in Africa. You need to start putting some money away for their trip to the United States. Get what you can and see how things turn out," Luki said.

"I hear what you're saying, *Bro*," Mola said.

"I know a fast food company that is hiring right now. Tomorrow I'll take you there to look for a job," Luki said.

"Thank you. What would I do in America without you?"

The next day Mola accompanied Luki to Anchor Foods Products, Inc. where he was asked to take a test in English and math in order to be employed as a production associate. The same day he was told he had passed both tests and asked to go for a drug test.

"Massa, dis wona kontry na helele-oh. Man don pass test finish dem say mek yi go do drug test, na who tell dem say me I de smoke banga?"^{cxxxiii} Mola complained.

"Bo, you don see wheti? Dis wan na daso di beginning. You want do seb bambe wok dem go mek you write kan-kan test. Enter mek we go,"^{cxxxiv} Luki said, slamming the door of his *merco*^{cxxxv} car.

"Ah, ah, massa!" Mola exclaimed.

They drove to Concentra Occupational Health Services where Mola was tested for drugs. The results that were mailed to him two weeks later showed that he was drug-free.

The following day he started work at Anchor Foods. His shift ran from 10:00pm to 6:00am Monday through Sunday in a production line. He was required to wear steel-toe shoes, pair of gloves, hair-net, ear-plugs, and white apron similar to the one won by nurses in hospitals. His friend bought these things for him because he had no money.

Anchor Foods was a beehive. In one corner of the building, some people were stacking; others were mixing flour. In the other end, some were fork-lifting; others were cleaning. Mola's job consisted of packing appetizers into cardboard boxes for shipment to whole-sale companies throughout North America. The noise produced by the machines drove Mola insane. At times they were so fast that he couldn't keep pace. When this happened, team mates would yell, heaping racial slurs on him. One day, a team mate called him black monkey. That was the last

straw. Mola walked straight into the office of the company manager and told him that he will commit manslaughter if people don't stop calling him bushman. It was only after the manager convened a meeting and emphasized the need for team spirit that associates stopped treating him like dirt.

"Massa, da wok na kanwa,"^{xxxxvi} he told his friend.

"You've got to be patient. Everyone who comes to America goes through this," Luki encouraged his friend.

"Is that true, bo?"

"Oh yes, I did worse things, including cleaning faeces from the butt of white people in assisted living homes," Mola assured his friend.

"Bo, it's terrible! Can you imagine that the job is so tedious that I have to ask for permission from time to time to go to the restroom and rest?" Mola said, looking worn out.

"This is America, the land of dreams!" Luki said, a smirk on his face.

"My brother, even nightmares have limits!" Mola retorted, wiping sweat off his broad forehead.

After working for nine months Mola rented his own flat and started making arrangements to bring his wife and children to America. Nyango was now well and could travel to the United States. He thought it would be wise to obtain immigrant visas for them before buying air tickets.

An immigration lawyer to whom Mola had presented the four cases advised him to file a Form I-130 titled 'Petition for Alien Relative'. He promptly did as instructed. After four weeks he received a letter from the Immigration and Naturalization Service requesting him to provide proof of paternity for his three kids.

"My brother, proof of paternity na which one no?"^{xxxvii} Mola said, showing Luki the letter from the INS.

'Massa, I member say na wona go big book?'^{cxviii} Luki said, grinning.

"Massa, leave me da big book palava,"^{cxviii} Mola said, wearing a look of frustration.

"Proof of paternity means that you have to do a DNA test to prove that you're father of your three kids," Luki explained.

"Which kan kontry be dis no? You don born pikin finish dem say mek you show say na you born dem? Barlok!"^{cxl} Mola said.

"This is America, land of freedoms," Luki said, sympathizing with his friend.

Mola and his friend did not know where to go for an immigration paternity test. After a painful search, they discovered a company called ReliaGene a leading DNA laboratory and research facility based in Louisiana. Mola was asked to pay the sum of \$ 3900.55 for the test. When he paid the money, ReliaGene sent a registered nurse to Chicago to take a blood sample from him. The company then sent a letter to Cameroon inviting Nyango and her three children to go to the American embassy in Yaoundé for blood samples to be taken from them. These were to be sent via diplomatic courier to Louisiana.

Four months had passed since the blood samples were taken from Mola, his wife and kids. He hadn't heard from ReliaGene yet. Then one fine afternoon while he was eating lunch, the postman knocked on his door and gave him a priority mail labeled 'DNA results'. Fingers quaking, he opened the envelope and read its contents:

"Linda Mola and Delphine Mola are biological offspring of Peter and Nyango Mola. Winston Mola, not biologically related to father."

Mola fell off his chair spilling the bowl of rice and pepper soup he was eating on his clothes.

"Papa God! What have I done to you?" He cried, rolling on the floor.

"Cringgg! Cringgg! Cringgg!" The phone rang.

"Hello!"

"Hello Mola! Luki here."

"My brother, I have terrible news-oh. Please, come over if you can," Mola said, still weeping.

"What is the terrible news now?"

"Massa, I can't discuss this on the phone, come over," he said, dropping the phone.

When Luki arrived at his friend's flat, he was lying on the couch sobbing.

"What's the matter, Mola?" Luki asked, shaking his friend vigorously.

"Massa, read this letter," he said, giving him the documents he'd received from ReliaGene.

"Really, this is bad news," Luki said, throwing himself on the couch beside his friend.

"One of my children is biologically not mine! What does this mean?"

"It means that you are not the biological father of the kid. That's what it means," Luki said, shaking his head from right to left.

"In other words, my wife cheated on me?" Mola asked, throwing his muscular hands on his broad shoulders.

"Massa, how can you ask me if the earth is round?" Luki said.

"Well, this is the end of my marriage with Nyango," Mola said, rising from the couch.

"So what are you going to do? Marry another woman?"

"No, I'm done with women."

"Are you going to bring your three kids to America?"

"Two, the third one is my wife's child."

"Oh, come on! A child is a child, born in or out of wedlock."

"That's not the issue."

"What's the issue?"

"The issue is breach of marital vow," Mola said, wishing his friend goodnight.

The next day Mola mailed two air tickets and a Photostat copy of the DNA results to his wife. He enclosed a hand-written letter in which he asked Nyango to send his two daughters to America and wished her a happy marriage with the father of her son.

NOTES

- i Obili junction
- ii Your mother's vagina.
- iii Carcass of a dog! Don't touch me!
- iv Prostitutes
- v Alcoholic beer
- vi Good for nothing person; fool.
- vii To be
- viii Do you want a woman for the night?
- ix No, my sister. I am not looking for a woman. I'm looking for my tribesman who lives in this city.
- x What is the name of your tribesman?
- xi He comes from Meka village.
- xii Are you from Meka too?
- xiii Yes, I hail from Meka myself
- xiv I think I know the Londu you are looking for.
- xv Is that true? So you know my tribesman!
- xvi Yes. Is Londu not a taxi-driver?
- xvii I don't know what he does for a living, sister.
- xviii My goodness! What kind of person are you? Are looking for some one you don't even know?
- xix My sister, I have just arrived from Bamenda. I am in search of a job here. My father says when I get here I should look for Londu.
- xx My friend, give me a bottle of beer. I will find Londu for you.
- xxi What do you drink, sister?
- xxii I drink nothing but 33 Export.
- xxiii I'll be right back, my brother.
- xxiv This is your tribesman.
- xxv Staple food made of corn flour.
- xxvi Smoked tilapia
- xxvii May God save us!
- xxviii Give a bribe.
- xxix Foolish Bamenda man

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- xxx Anglophone; English-speaking.
- xxxi Metonym for Cameroon.
- xxxii Son of a bitch! Are you sick?
- xxxiii Anglophone! Get lost, idiot! Go tell your mother to carry you there!
- xxxiv Sir I don't understand the dialect you're speaking.
- xxxv Here is Yaoundé. You have to speak French, do you hear? Here we speak only French.
- xxxvi What?
- xxxvii He is a Biafran.
- xxxviii Yaoundé General Hospital.
- xxxix Are you sane?
- xl Yes, I am sane.
- xli An ideophone in the Bamunka language expressing great surprise.
- xliv These are words of wisdom.
- xlvi Hat made of multicoloured fabric won by men of title in the grassfields region of the Republic of Cameroon. It is painstakingly embroidered.
- xliv We agree.
- xlvi Propitiation song to appease the ancestors.
- xlvi Traditional cup made out of the horn of a buffalo.
- xlvi Ideophone indicating the slow movement of a toad.
- xlvi Snail.
- xlvi Witchdoctor
- l Witchcraft.
- li Oh, no!
- lii In the name of Allah
- lii Annual reed festival celebrating virginity.
- liv Gossip.
- lv A type of relatively inexpensive and popular red wine bottled in Cameroon.

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- lvi When a story is sweet a thief who had been
hiding in the ceiling may laugh and get caught.
- lvii Marijuana.
- lviii Young bride.
- lix Whore.
- lx Minor.
- lxi Clean-shaven.
- lxii You're insane.
- lxiii Heir
- lxiv Whip made out of cow hide.
- lxv My lord.
- lxvi Traditional village head.
- lxvii Embroidered.
- lxviii Huckle berry soup.
- lxix Bathing sponge.
- lxx Whore.
- lxxi Your Royal Highness.
- lxxii Traditional outfit.
- lxxiii Leopard-skin bag.
- lxxiv Amulets.
- lxxv Yes.
- lxxvi Derogatory name for albino.
- lxxvii I am here.
- lxxviii Feast.
- lxxix A type of fufu made from cassava paste
fermented in water.
- lxxx Pounded cocoyam wrapped in banana or
plantain leaves.
- lxxxi Traditional secret society.
- lxxxii The seven notables of the village traditional
Ruling Council.
- lxxxiii Notable.
- lxxxiv Hat worn by a title-holder.
- lxxxv Soothsayer
- lxxxvi Witchcraft.

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- lxxxvii Royal pages.
- lxxxviii Witchdoctor's pot.
- lxxxix Tea leaves.
- xc From the English word "rat".
- xcI Long, loose-fitting African garment.
- xcii Royal body guards.
- xciii Amulets
- xciv Wild animal
- xcv White man.
- xcvi Native Sabbath.
- xcvii Beads.
- xcviii My son, give my own share of the money, let me eat before death takes me away.
- xcix Aunt, this green card lottery that I have won is not money.
- c Ah ah, if lottery is not money, what is it? Please give my own share and let me leave peacefully.
- ci Aunt, you're my mother. I can't lie to you. Lottery is only a sheet of paper given to me by the American government that allows me to immigrate to America.
- cii Go away! You youngsters are full of tricks!
- ciiii What are you going to eat in that distant land? Do they cook fufu and huckle-berry soup there?
- civ No grandma. There is no fufu and huckle-berry soup there but we will not die of starvation. White people do not go to bed on an empty stomach. There is food there. We hear there's a lot of hamburger and hotdog in America.
- cv Those people eat dogs!
- cvi Loincloth.
- cvii Amen
- cviii Delivery truck.
- cix My friend, God has actually buttered your bread.
- cx Brother, it's pure luck.

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- cxix Cassava paste wrapped in banana leaves.
- cxii Sixth sense.
- cxiii What sort of ill-luck is this?
- cxiv I have no clue what's going on.
- cxv Chief, term of respect for the police in Cameroon.
- cxvi These whites are insane.
- cxvii Fetish.
- cxviii These whites are fools.
- cxix Brother, it's a long story. I'll tell you when we get to your home.
- cxx My friend, they say that my wife has contracted a disease called Africanosomiasis.
- cxxi My friend, I've brought a small quantity of *ndole* for you. That will make you think of home.
- cxixii My friend, isn't it better here than home?
- cxixiii We are only chatting. How can one compare Heaven and Hell?
- cxixiv My friend, is this the kind of wives you guys have here?
- cxixv What do you mean?
- cxixvi How can a husband prepare food while his wife relaxes in the chair?
- cxixvii Brother, if you go to Rome do like the Romans.
- cxixviii My friend, I hear you but I don't think this type of marriage will last.
- cxixix Whether or not it lasts, it doesn't matter to me. It's a marriage of convenience, contracted for the purpose of obtaining identity papers.
- cxixx What is marriage of convenience, my brother?
- cxixxi I am referring to a marriage where you wed an American woman for the purpose of getting your green card very fast.
- cxixxii Oh ho! I had been wondering about this matter.

cxixiii Brother, this country of yours is tough. After passing the test they are now asking me to go for a drug test. *Who* told them that I smoke marijuana?

cxixiv My brother, you haven't seen anything yet, this is only the beginning. They'd make you take all sorts of tests even if you're applying for a blue-collar job.

cxixv Mercedes.

cxixvi My friend, the job is tough.

cxixvii My brother, what is this story about proof of paternity?

cxixviii My friend, I thought you were one of those who went to institutions of higher learning.

cxixix My friend, stop talking about higher learning.

cxl What kind of country is this? After fathering children they require you to prove that you are their biological father? This is unfortunate!

Grassfields Stories from Cameroon is an anthology of short stories. It comprises animal trickster tales, bird survival tales, and human-interest stories. The compendium is a reflection of the mores, cultures, and value systems of the indigenous peoples of the Northwest Province of Cameroon. It is motivated by the author's keen interest in the preservation of Cameroonian oral traditions in written form.

These stories deal with the day-to-day life of the sedentary and the globe-trotter. Each story is sufficient unto itself. The author has intentionally avoided chronology in the order of presentation of the stories. Whether you read the stories in the order in which they are presented or dart about as your fancy dictates, you will feel the abundance of richness and entertainment the book contains.

The didactic value of this collection of short stories resides in its suitability to readers of all age groups. The uniqueness of the volume lies in its universal appeal.

Peter Wuteh Vakunta was born and raised in the village of Bamunka-Ndop in Cameroon where he worked as senior translator at the Presidency of the Republic before immigrating to America. He is an alumnus of Sacred Heart College-Mankon. Vakunta obtained his Bachelor degrees in Cameroon and Nigeria; MA and MSE degrees in Cameroon and the U.S.A. At present, Vakunta and his family live in Madison, U.S.A. He teaches in the Department of French and Italian at the University of Wisconsin-Madison where he is also completing his PhD dissertation titled: *Translation in Literature: Indigenization in the Francophone Text*.

Vakunta is poet, storyteller and essayist. His published works include *Better English: Mind Your P's and Q's*, *Lion Man and Other Stories* (short stories), *Brainwaves* (poems), *Pandora's Box* (poems). *African Time and Pidgin Verses* (poems), *Square Pegs in Round Holes* (essays) and *It Takes Guts* (essays). Vakunta's literary works have earned him several awards in the U.S.A, U.K and Africa.



Langaa Research and Publishing
Common Initiative Group
P.O. Box 902 Mankon
Bamenda
North West Province
Cameroon



Cover Image: Francis Nyamnjoh